

赤松中学



赤 弾 の ア リ ア ル XII

Aria the Scarlet
Ammo

狼狗に降る雪
フォル・オブリージュ

Hidan no Aria

vol.12 - Snowfall upon a Wolfhound – Fall
Oblige

by Chūgaku Akamatsu

[Novel Updates](#)

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Chapter 1: Like Vanishing into Thin Air

I felt like I was ambushed. I just heard it was an 'important announcement' and followed Takamagahara-sensei to the headmaster's office... and the headmaster himself had personally handed down the sentence.

—Expulsion.

—this certainly *was* an important announcement.

Upon hearing these words, I forgot Butei High's rule against 'asking teachers to repeat themselves' and my lips voiced the words:

"I'm... being expelled?"

I looked at the two teachers standing on the side, Yutori Takamagahara and Ranbyou, as our expulsion was announced and Reki remained mute.

Headmaster Midorimatsu nodded his head mechanically,

"Yes, yes, that is correct. However, this is not due to any problems with your behaviour, so I hope there won't be any misunderstandings on that point."

Continuing with a voice that lacked any individuality...

"Both of you have filed school transfer requests twice. The first time, your applications were rejected on the basis of incomplete paperwork, but that was not actually the case. Frankly, this is the usual way we process such requests. It takes into account the possibility of forgery, and until they re-apply, it gives the student the opportunity to reconsider, as is our hope."

As I recall, I did resubmit my transfer request. But... rather than being surprised at MASTERS tricks— I was even more surprised that Reki had also applied for a transfer.

"Reki, you..."

I cast a glance at Reki who stood stock still by my side. Reki turned towards me...

"Kinji, as I have said before, **I am yours**. The loyalty of the Ulus is eternal. I will be with you wherever you go and be the person who will live and die with you."

As if she weren't in front of the headmaster, Reki talked in her usual manner.

Misunderstanding, Takamagahara-sensei blushed with an 'Oh, my!', and Ranbyou raised an eyebrow...

Come to think of it, it did indeed feel like Reki had said something like that before. She had already made up her mind— even if I leave school, Reki will follow me.

"—Transferring from Butei High to a normal school is extremely difficult."

Headmaster Midorimatsu showed no reaction toward Reki's words and said:

"Normally, students should all transfer schools at the end of March... but done that way, all the accepting schools flood the Metropolitan Board of Education's office with complaints. They say that students from Butei High are poor in their studies, lacking social education, and have high drop-out rates from their institutions. Butei High is, thus, now in danger of a shut-down. Academia just does not yet have a proper understanding of Butei High at all."

Well... no, I think they actually do have a proper understanding. That is: this school is full of weirdos.

"Therefore, this matter of transferring schools has been changed to a method where a small number of students are transferred at fixed intervals over time, and in secret. But right now, students would be leaving before the April weapons registration renewal. No matter if they plan to keep their weapons or not... those students will be ostracised for merely holding the licence. And if the other school knows that the student is transferring from Butei High, they will hardly be allowed entry."

I wasn't as if I couldn't understand the concerns of normal schools, but this was... discrimination.

"However— we have to thank the Ministry of Education for the provisions of the Protection of Personal Information: Article No. 8. Transfers cannot be done, but students can be accepted... Students that have been expelled are not required to give notice of 'which High School they previously attended'.

Although this requires the use of a little expenditure and some private exchange with fellow headmasters, it can be done, however. Depending on their morals..."

So using the pretext of the law, cash is being used to squeeze us into other schools. But I could understand why, since the headmaster said if it isn't done this way, Butei High students wouldn't be able to transfer school.

It seems like I really don't have enough experience on this point.

Just then, headmaster Midorimatsu somewhat abruptly turned to the side.

"Right... Takamagahara-sensei, Ran-sensei. In Toshima, there's a pretty good school called East Ikebukuro High, right?"

"Indeed."

"Yes."

"....Now then, we were a little off-topic just now, so let us return to the issue at hand."

The headmaster said, and once again turned back to us...

It seems that he already contacted that other school. This is an order to me and Reki to go to that school on our own, as students unaffiliated with Butei High.

Then, suddenly...

"Please retract that decision."

With a tone as mechanical as the headmaster's, Reki suddenly spoke up.

"Kinji applied to transfer schools, not to be expelled. Please follow Kinji's wishes and let him transfer. Also, the timing is different. Not the end of this month, please follow Kinji's wishes and change it to the end of March next year"

Hey, Reki...! Didn't you listen to what the headmaster just said? Also, you keep going 'Kinji this', 'Kinji that'. Why is it that for me you would go against the teachers? No, of course, what Reki said was sound logic. But this is Butei High. Furthermore, the MASTERS are angry. You can't use logic in such a place.

"–Reki! A little brat like you daring to talk back to MASTERS! You have some nerve!"

The irrational response by Ranbyou was immediate, her large ponytail swaying as she raised her voice.

"Reki-san. Students who want to transfer must first drop out¹ here, and are required to re-take an entrance exam for another school."

Takamagahara-sensei said gently, admonishing Reki.

"Those are all the school authorities' problems. They have nothing to do with Kinji."

Yet, still standing straight, Reki, without a quiver...*Shin*...released her killing intent..!

Just because things did not go as I would like, you plan challenge the t-teachers?

Reki.

Beside me who was panicking, Ranbyou's killing intent suddenly grew terrifying—Takamagahara also gave off a different feeling.

Th-this is bad.....!

Now, even a small thing could suddenly push us past the point of no return.

Following my pre-battle routine, I immediately analysed the fighting strength in the room.

As I said, their side is led by Ranbyou, Reki didn't have her Dragunov sniper rifle, and I didn't bring any pistol ammo. I could hardly beat this person. Because this Ranbyou-sensei is not only a beast that can single-handedly subdue Aria, but is also quite familiar with my fighting style from my days in Assault.

There's also Takamagahara-sensei, although I haven't seen her fight before, but this feeling is.... also... very dangerous...! Come to think of it, she's able to be in the same room as the two 'Guardians of Heaven'² Ranbyou and Tsuzuri and come out unharmed every day, so she's absolutely not a normal person. There

is her to deal with as well.

But—the most dangerous of all was headmaster Midorimatsu...!

Th-this...can't be happening...

A sensation I've never felt before made my face immediately pale.

The surrounding killing intent was clearly intense, yet with a laughing "Haha, this won't do." the headmaster's killing intent, no, his presence.... is disappearing!? No, that's not right. It's becoming '**undetectable**'.

If it was just 'disappearing', there were still ways to respond. Because then it would be enough just to keep a vigilant eye on all of your surroundings. But if it's 'undetectable', your conscious mind would be in disorder, leaving you full of openings.

And now, I was: 'Is he there now? Or is he not there?' I couldn't even figure that out...!

I-I really don't want to fight.

No, it wouldn't even be a fight. In a situation like this, even in Hysteria Mode, I wouldn't be able to.

Ranbyou and Takamagahara noticed the change in the headmaster, and also began to worry. They were not angry at Reki, and were instead guarding against the possibility that the headmaster might recklessly **attack** Reki and me...!

W-what should I do!

Reki had unflinchingly challenged the headmaster— If that powder keg was set off, we wouldn't leave the headmaster's office in one piece. No, our very lives were in danger. Butei indeed are obliged not to kill. But in reality, as long as you're not found out, you can do as you wish.

But here in MASTERS, our school's teachers were very good at handling the police. There are even rumours that they have killed one or two students and called it an accident.

The next instant, feeling the killing intent of Reki, Ranbyou, and Takamagahara filling the room—I took a chance.

"-Reki, stop it!"

I shouted loudly.

Normally making the first move, I ought to have stirred up the hornet's nest, but...

"..."

I-It didn't happen. Neither bullets or weapons appeared.

Then, following my order Reki...just like turning off a switch, Reki returned to normal, and Ranbyou and Takamagahara also followed suit and withdrew their killing intent.

Th-thank goodness...I got lucky.

Just now, I gambled everything on the common sense that 'teachers wouldn't kill students' and acted based on that. And the teachers... let us go this time.

Just like the 'brats' Ranbyou had called us, we presumed upon our teachers good graces.

"M-my apologies. We will follow what the headmaster has said, and drop-out of school. Reki, that's fine with you, right?"

Reki... gave a nod of her head.

Now Reki is back to her regular self, but thinking about just now... I had the feeling that this normal Reki is subtly different than the Reki of a few moments ago.

Just now. That standoff had clearly been Reki's fault, and she had asked for it. Although I know that Reki is an unusually reckless person, but just now, it was to such an extent that I gave up analysing the situation.

Reki. Your fighting ability is indeed very high. But you have to gauge your strengths in actual combat. Isn't that what you taught me? So why then did you flare up against the teachers just because they did not follow my requests? Your calmness is supposed to be your strong point.

That said... she will follow me. Even to a new school.

I let out a deep sigh of relief.

"Ah, this isn't right of me. When I see such unpolished diamonds....I can't help but want to smash them to pieces."

As he said that, I realised that I could once again perceive the source of that voice, headmaster Midorimatsu. Our eyes meeting...

"–Stop her a bit sooner next time. Isn't she your woman?"

As if it was a farewell gift, he had showed me his true nature for 5 seconds and saying...

"Now then, any questions?"

He once more looked like an average Japanese person, and I couldn't tell what was going on behind his inscrutable smile.

Question: Headmaster, why did *you* decide to become a school teacher.

The headmaster soon afterwards flatly transmitted his orders to us:

-To avoid criminal retaliation, it is not recommended that you turn in your Butei license or get rid of your weaponry immediately after dropping out.

-Treat this as having accepted a long-term classified mission from MASTERS, and conceal the fact that you have dropped out of school.

-Put your affairs in order, and leave as if you had vanished without a trace.

We were told such.

That is why there would occasionally be students who left on long-term assignments and never come back. I had speculated that they were earning work-study credits, stationed overseas, or had already found employment, but... it looks like they must also have dropped-out and transferred schools.

There weren't a few days left till the month ended, I casually turned over my routine jobs to Fuuma, bequeathed the Toyota 2000-GT model car that he had been bugging me for since forever to Mutou, glumly paid my debts to Hiraga-san, and hastily settled my business.

But from what I see, it looks like Reki has done nothing. All the same, she

accompanied me as I tried to leave the impression with the members of Baskerville that I was 'going on a secret mission'.

Thus passed November 29th at Butei High, and the evening of the last Sunday of the month.

We went to Riko, who loved to pry into everything first—to girls' dormitory No.2—where Riko had pretended to be Aria and tricked me into entering—and as what was originally a 3-person apartment No.1011 opened...

Uh... what's going on?

There was a female scent being given off and another strange smell. Something volatile.

A pile of shoes in the entryway, "Leaving school for a classified mission next month." came the soft explanation. "Ki-kun and Reks working together? The 'Golden Duo' from first year is making a comeback!" said Riko as she reached the middle of the room, her grimy hands holding rubberised tape and walking shakily. Just what is she doing? Don't tell me she's manufacturing illegal chemical weapons?

Entering to inspect the already occupied room...

.....?

In the middle of the room three tables were put together, Jeanne sat at one of them, and at the other...sat a petite, long-haired, gloomy girl with black hair whom I didn't recognise. They were all silently drawing something.

That is....ah, so it's a manga manuscript! It's the first time I've seen the real thing.

And the smell that filled the room, seems to have come from the correction fluids and colourings they used.

"What are you guys doing?"

Squatting near the reference material spread out on the couch, Riko flopped herself down atop my knees.

"Helping. Uh... winter is coming..."

"Winter? It's winter right now. Here, I even brought back the games I borrowed. Let go of my leg!"

When the Riko had crawled her soft body up, I brushed her off, but she didn't even seem to care.

Just then, a shadow carrying a silver plate with Yunker³ on it slipped out from the kitchen and moved beside the couch,

"To.....Tohyama!"

With a start, Jeanne—who for some reason had tears in her eyes—suddenly looked up toward me. It seems that she had just noticed my presence.

She has amazing powers of concentration. When it comes to drawing manga.

"Help me, Riko and Momoko won't let me draw at all. Forget characters, they're not even letting me do backgrounds! I've done enough framing and spot filling⁴...! Oh, Mon Dieu..."



Seeming to be as exhausted as Riko, Jeanne leaned against the sofa like some

tragic heroine.

"—You two, break down after just two nights?"

The doll-like Japanese girl dressed in a school uniform said to Riko and Jeanne from her desk.

Although she was cute...those emotionless eyes were still on the manuscript. She didn't glance my way at all. And on her left hand—she wore a glove. Although it was covered with a ribbon, my intuition told me something bad was definitely hidden inside.

"Who's that?"

I asked Jeanne in a quiet voice.

"She's our schoolmate who was originally from IU. A poison expert nicknamed 'Devil Scorpion'"

"Wait a minute..!"

"No need to worry. Right now she's a friend, no, a teacher. She's very good at drawing manga. If it gets a good distribution, it will add quite a bit to the war chest funds. So help us sell them as well. Follow me to the West Annex⁵!"

Jeanne said that, assuming I would be staying at Butei High...

Instead, this reminded me that the opposite was true—I was deliberately transferring schools.

From now on, it might not be possible to meet up everyone from Butei High.

"Eh, sorry but, Reki and I have a secret mission..."

Things being how they were, I didn't want to get too involved with the dangerous person that came from IU and made my apologies to excuse myself...

"Secret mission? Is it the same one as Nui-Nui's?"

Riko asked as she turned her large lidded eyes toward me.

Does she mean Shiranui...?

"Eh? No. it's different."

I answered laconically.

Well, knowing Shiranui, he probably received a real mission. After all, he's an ASSAULT honour student.

Utterly exhausted, Riko blew a kiss from the window, and I inadvertently let out a wry smile when...*tug*, Reki silently urged me on with a tug on my sleeve.

Then reaching the greenhouses in front of Girls' Dormitory No.1...

"Congratulations on your new mission! Work hard, Kin-chan!"



Shirayuki greeted me with words like that, and began straightening my

necktie as if she were my wife.

Being Head Gardener , it seems that Shirayuki uses her butterfly familiars to help out, and they had just watered the flowers... and the camellia flowers behind her really suited her.

Even when wearing a sailor uniform, the ideal woman and Japanese flowers pair quite well.

Truly, now that I'm seeing her from up close, I realised that no matter how many times I see her, no matter how you look at it, she is as expected... a beauty.

On the whole, she has a wonderful personality. Mostly...

"..."

For a few heartbeats, I stood and silently gazed at her in a trance.

To this childhood friend before me, besides girls (which for some reason she would go crazy if I brought up) and Hysteria Mode, I can't recall ever hiding anything from her... and I felt a little guilty. It being an order, I truly cannot tell you the truth. But this definitely isn't some final farewell. Forgive me.

Even though I am transferring schools, if something happens, I will definitely hurry back. After all, I will have to hold on to my Butei license for a while.

My heart full of thoughts like this, I quietly gazed into Shirayuki's eyes.

"...Kin-chan..."

Shirayuki's voice was like a strawberry Daifuku⁶ dusted with sugar, sweetly calling out my name, and the eyes behind her straight-cut bangs, were also gazing back at me. Then, she gave what looked like a shy smile, her gaze tilting downwards.... turning away.

Facing Reki who had been watching us with a bored stare, she shot an expression that seemed to say 'You saw the depth of our bond!'

-*Bzzz**Bzzz*.

As Shirayuki and Reki's eyes met it looked like sparks went up just then, like an optical illusion... And Shirayuki deliberately turned to face me once again

with a beaming smile. Apparently that 'death at a glance battle' had been decided as an 'ab initio victory'.

At least when it came to Shirayuki.

"Your number of concubines is limited to two. And, thanks to my 'samurai's mercy', your younger sister does not enter into the accounting."

She said with a smile, although I don't completely understand the meaning behind 'don't put bananas in your snacks' and other such statements...but she's already on quite good terms with Kaname now. Perhaps their feelings coincided, no, their personalities seemed to be very similar. I even remember Aria saying it was something like 'misery loving company'.

Right... Shirayuki, about half a year earlier on that artificial beach, you said 'Kin-chan will disappear from where he is now'.

Looks like your predication was really spot on.

At night, walking past the Sakura tree that Aria and I were thrown into during the April bike bombing incident—now having neither flowers nor leaves—Reki and I went to the cafe Ville de Chute⁷ at the T-junction.

Since this place catered to schoolgirls, I usually kept a respectful distance...but Aria seemed to be here.

I noticed her in an instant. That head of scarlet hair was conspicuous no matter how you looked at it, and she was talking to someone.

Reki and I stood beside her table,

"Ah, Tohyama Kinji.....Senpai"

Mamiya is here.

The first year schoolgirl Aria was talking to was the Amica Aria was training. Also, that slight pause in her speech just now perfectly represents how she truly thinks of me—addressing me without honorifics—, but today I will graciously overlook it.

"So? When are you coming back?"

Not even waiting for me to open my mouth, Aria seemed to have already heard everything about my secret mission from Riko and greeted me with such a sentence... *Sip* *Sip* An espresso in one hand, and playing it cool, she acted like she was my boss. Pfft! How funny.

As long as she was in front of her junior, Aria would act with a completely different personality than usual, because she had a bad habit of acting the 'capable woman'.

Although this brat usually opened fire before opening her mouth, by my calculations, with her junior here, the probability of her shooting was 57%, and even if she did open fire, the bullet count would decrease a substantial 41%. Although her accuracy would also increase.

I also knew that this topic would anger her, so beforehand I prepared the 'use Reki as a shield and run plan' that would not work in this case, but surprisingly, everything was alright.

"The length of the job is also a secret. But, it will be long-term."

Hearing this, it seemed that Mamiya finally understood I was going to carry out an outside school mission, and she couldn't hide the happy expression on her face. But I will also forgive her for this. Thanks to you and Reki being here, I have escaped the jaws of death.

"Although we're partners, I never wanted to tie you down. You also seem to be lacking some credits. But, if the enemy moves I will call you."

Enemy... she should be talking about the members of Grenada.

"Understood."

At the very least, I will be fighting with you until March. That will end our agreement.

"Aria, your finger..."

Buteis have a custom especially for partners parting ways— What I asked Aria to do was twine index fingers with me. Transferring schools is a parting of ways, and this counts as a small hint.

"What's this? Are you going somewhere dangerous?"

But twining fingers often meant that one of the partners involved was going somewhere from which they might not come back... Aria, who appears to have misunderstood, didn't extend her hand.

"It is, in a certain sense... but where I'm going is safe. It just seemed right to twine fingers before this mission."

"I won't do it. It would be bad luck"

"Didn't we do this before?"

"I don't remember."

With a twist, Aria turned away brusquely, her long, elegant twin-tails flowing.

As always, you suffer from amnesia whenever you get worked up.

"You did. The last day of summer vacation, on the roof of INQUESTA before..."

Thanks to our combined stubbornness, in the middle of our argument I had done it... I had reminded Aria of her trauma from the time she decided to kiss me, and I had said the forbidden word 'roof'.

I turned pale, and suddenly... Aria's blush-o-meter soared. Quivering...

"R-roo!"

Trembling, her cute anime-like voice quavered. B-bad, this is bad....

This is her 'full meltdown mode' that annihilates everything in its path, and it will happen in 5 seconds...!

I turned toward my human-shield Reki... but she wasn't there! She had already exited the cafe and was peering back at us through the gap between bulletproof doors that had almost swung closed.

That's some ability to sense imminent danger, Reki!

"Mamiya! Hold down Aria's guns!"

"R-right!?"

As Mamiya clamped down on Aria's legs with a confused expression on her face, I forcibly took Aria's small hand and...

Squeeze

...twined fingers. Now for my escape!

Run, Run Kinji!

In imitation of Reki, I made an all-out dash toward the bulletproof doors, hurling myself outside the shop with a yell. Mt. Aria had erupted with a rumbling roar behind us, accompanied by Mamiya's shriek.

Having to risk your life to say farewell... That's Aria H. Kanzaki for you.

Rather, please reset your system to freak out less often over a simple word, Aria.

Seriously...

The last day of November, 5.00 in the afternoon. Reki and I returned to MASTERS and were formally expelled from Tokyo Butei High.

In accordance with our orders to vanish, we spent our last few days as normally as possible, but this was the end. Unconsciously, life at Butei High had become normal for me, but now that status quo was going to be broken. It was half personal reasons and half adult circumstances that it was so easily destroyed.

So today I bid farewell to these school buildings...

Thinking that, I swept my eyes over the INQUESTA building and ASSAULT further on, and I experienced a strange feeling of loss.

Goodbye classmates I have fought with until the brink of death. Even though they are strange, deep down they really are good people.

Farewell cafeteria. Your unappetising food was passably edible.

Finally, like a bird about to take wing and vanish without a trace... I made a thorough spring cleaning of my apartment in Boy's Dormitory No. 3. Although it was sudden, farewell. That should take care of everything.

With the cold sea-breeze in my face, and my few belongings in hands... I was standing on the Futoukita platform at Academy Island's northernmost point.

Reki and Haimaki stood beside me.

Come to think of it, Reki and I met here for the first time for the Tokyo Butei High entrance examinations. Only this time, instead of coming, the two of us are leaving. Fate is strange, isn't it?

Since the monorail was empty, we sat in a car meant to accommodate 4 people. Having placed the suitcase that held her disassembled sniper rifle on her knees, Reki seemed...

Why are you a little happy?

This was not her everyday blank expression— empty as a clear sky— as she looked at me. As if I was looking at the wind turbines on 'Empty Island'⁸...

"Say Reki... What do you plan to do about your name? In Butei High everything is ridiculous anyway, so you could go without having a family name, but that won't work in a normal school."

I rasied the topic.

"What about Tohyama? I could be your sister."

"Knock it off. I've gotten too many sisters lately. Pick your own alias."

"Please choose one for me."

"I already said no."

"Yada then."

'Yada'⁹... How lazy can she be?

So in the end, I did end up picking her name, but that's alright. It doesn't really matter.

"Now about somewhere to stay... Today we have the hotel that Edogawa-sensei from LOGI booked for us, but where do you plan to live after tommorrow?"

I had already made plans to go back to my parent's home in Sugamo, but Reki had not told me her new address.

"..."

Stare

Reki is staring at me.

No way... You can't come to my house, Yada-san.

"..."

Well... it's not that I gave into the silent pressure or anything, but I guess it would be for the best. We've already divided Baskerville's fighting strength. If the time came, it would be dangerous for us to separate further. We got off the monorail at Daiba Station, where they were just starting to decorate for Christmas. Turning our backs towards Butei High.

"Let's go Reki."

In response to my low voice, Reki nodded— and the first snow of the season began to fall.

After that, we continued to the appointed exam hall... The school we were transferring to was affiliated with a gap-school¹⁰, and only the two of us were taking the entrance exam. I don't think that I scored particularly well— especially in the interview. I was downright nervous. I felt that in my future prospects, I might not be able to get a job, but I saw that Reki passed the interview answering 'yes' and 'no' to every question, so it must have been due to our Headmaster's connections.

Was this some kind of parting gift from Butei High?

So arriving at my small single hotel room, I sprawled myself across the bed. Thinking about everyone I left behind... Ever since my brother disappeared, I have wanted to leave Butei High. Although the reason changed over time, the desire never did. This is the realisation of that desire. I no longer have a dangerous job with risk of daily injury. In the end, there is no one like my brother to blame me. I no longer have to pray that I will become a deadly statistic one day in training.

A normal high school...

I wonder what kind of place it is. I'm looking forward to finding out.

Since grade school, I have not had the opportunity to attend a regular school.

I once infiltrated one as part of an investigation, but that was a school for the high-class elite. Of course I had seen them in news documentaries and dramas, but that was like watching the Koshien Game¹¹ through a key-hole.

A normal school... it really seems like a dreamy things... somewhere fun—and overflowing with hope. The kind of place where everyone laughs and plays sports, people form clubs around their interests, hang out with friends, dress fashionably, freak out over music, and study hard, all to become productive members of society and take their place among a fine body of scholars. A normal school was a good thing that seemed like a dream-world.

The world praises one's high school days as 'The height of one's youth'.

Y-youth, huh? That was something I had given up on enjoying, but now it's possible for me from now on. I may not know what I can do, but I will definitely be able to enjoy it. Embarrassed to be grinning like an idiot, I pulled the sheets entirely over my head.

This is fun... I am having fun.

At last my spring has come. Even though it is winter outside.

1. In Japanese the word for 'expel' is the same as 'drop-out'. This caused a headache to translate, but I used word that seemed most appropriate in context.

2. The word used to describe Ranbyou and Tsuzuri is one that refers to two Bhuddist deities that act as gate-keepers to heaven. Some temples have them carved into the door posts. I don't know their right names or much about them as the articles I did find about them were in Chinese.

3. Yunker is a Japanese energy shot with a lot of vitamins and herbs mixed in.

4. Spot-filling is work done by assistants filling in the outlines that the actual artist drew with solid colours. Basically, she's colouring in the lines the others have drawn.

5. The West Annex is the name of a convention center where Comiket is held.

6. Kind of sweet bun.

7. The name of the cafe is a joke. The name means ‘place/city of the fall’ in French. It gets its significance from the prior line that reminds us Kinji and Aria both *ha* ‘fell’ here.

8. The abandoned platform island near Butei High’s Academy Island.

9. ‘yada’ (Short form of iya da) is slang for ‘no’. Reki took Kinji’s refusal and changed it to sound like a real Japanese last name.

10. Actual term ‘Yubikou’ A school that high school graduates go to to improve test scores for entrance to university. Students at these schools (called ronins) usually take a year off after to study at this kind of school so that they can improve their scores and get into better universities. They take a gap-year, hence my coinage of ‘gap-school’.

11. The annual national Japanese high school baseball championship games are held here. It’s a huge event with 49 teams delegated from the whole country.

Chapter 2: Kinji-An Ordinary Person

December 1st. From today, I am a normal person. No matter where I go, I am an ordinary high school student attending this normal school. Without her sniper rifle or Haimaki trailing behind her, having taken off her usual headphones because they violate school rules, and wearing a blazer made of normal cloth, Reki looked surprisingly fresh... This is something I have to get used to as soon as possible.

This is our first time attending East Ikebukuro High, and it really does seem like an ordinary school—it's normal. Wonderful! Unlike the buildings at Butei High that looked like some kind of secret base.

I don't like the fact that it's a co-ed school, but I can't ask for too much.

My heart pounding, I changed into my indoor shoes and entered the school...

Just now, I began to search with my eyes for a pillar to use as cover out of habit, but that is no longer necessary. Students were joking around in the hallway, and there was not a trace of the smell of gunpowder. There's a sense in the air that none of them are thinking about tactics or special skills. The people I see here don't think about things like 'who they will team-up with to survive'.

This is the peaceful world I've always wanted...!

I've done it! After so long, I've finally made it. Finally, my dream has come true!

Eyes sparkling, without gun or knife, I entered the teacher's staff room...

I was assigned to class 2-2 and Reki was assigned to class 2-1 so we were separated. The homeroom teacher in charge of my class—based on the what I could gather by reading the lips of the others students' conversation as they passed in front of me—is the Phys. Ed. teacher nicknamed 'Gori'¹. Although he does seem healthy and fit, he is different from my last Phys. Ed. teacher who could flip a bus over single-handed. He seems like an ordinary middle-aged

man.

Then...

With a noise, Gori opened the sliding door and entered the noisy classroom.

"We'll start homeroom when you're quiet... Today we have a transfer student to introduce."

Like a school drama, Gori said this and took a piece of chalk...

'Kinji Tohyama'

Like a drama, he wrote out my name on the blackboard. My new classmates eyes were all turned toward me...

"If you have any questions, you can raise your hand later. Now then, why don't you introduce yourself, Tohyama."

He said that, and I...

"Y-yes. Uh... I'm Kinji Tohyama. I look forward to getting along well."

In Butei High, it was pounded into our heads that when in front of a large group of people, one should not reveal too much about yourself. Falling back into this habit, I gave my name that was written on the blackboard behind me... and that was all. But apparently in a normal school, that was not enough, and hands shot up quickly. Before my expression could change...

"Show us a neat trick!"

A boy said.

It seems that no matter where I go, people are always asking me to do absurd things like that. However, I'm in trouble... The 'normal me'—apart from the tricks that I can do opening and closing my butterfly knife that Shirayuki raves about—is pretty unexciting. Bringing a knife to school would be a violation of the rules anyway.

"I'm not very good at things like that..."

I said as I looked away.

"Do you have any hobbies?"

"Nothing in particular... Watching television and movies, I guess..."

"Any special talents?"

"Special talents... not really."

And so it went on, and I was unable to give any kind of interesting reply. So everyone thought I was boring.

So I'm a boring person... but I already knew that.

As homeroom ended, Gori said:

"If there's anything about the school that Tohyama doesn't know, please show him."

Gori addressed this to the classmate sitting next to me and left me in their charge. The person he had designated walked over to my seat near the window in the back of the room and turned to face me. The girl turned around with a smiling face.

"Although Sensei already said it, if you have any questions, please ask me. I'm Moe Mochizuki. I'm one of the class representatives. Since there is a Mochizuki in another class, please call me Moe."

The way she was talking, I could tell that she is trying to be kind because of the self-introduction that I flubbed so spectacularly. And she's cute. It doesn't make sense that she would be talking like this to me.

"Is there anything you want to know now?"

Her light brown, smooth hair was cut in a light bob, and going by her eyebrows, that is her natural colour. Her large, double lidded eyes were gentle. Her complexion was fair, her height 158 cm, and although perhaps not to the degree of Shirayuki or Nakasorachi, she has a buxom figure.

As an old habit from INQUESTA, I analysed each part of her appearance.

"No... Not right now."

I couldn't carry on a conversation with her. Ordinarily, girls were something I avoided like the plague... but how to say it? She seems like a good, normal girl.

She could never be friends with a person like me— tainted by guns and knives. At Butei High, everyone—boy or girl—are all oddballs, so no matter what I said, I played the straight man. I was so firmly entrenched in that role, that it made it hard to talk to this normal girl.

In addition to Moe, until the short class break ended, a few boys addressed me, but for similar reason, I could not carry on a decent conversation. They all became bored and saying...

"Well, if you're doing anything fun, call me."

...leaving me with that, they were gone.

The lessons in a normal school are quite difficult. Now I am fully realising how lacking the academics at Butei High were, so I'll have to work hard. From now on Calculus formulae and equations will definitely be more useful to me than knowledge about guns or the art of tailing.

As I told myself that, I heard the teacher's voice as I read from my Ancient Literature textbook.

'At the end of the East Road, as one who had been born and raised inland...'

Click

Smith and Wesson M19 Combat Magnum—4 inch model!

From off to the side behind me, I thought I heard the sound of a cocking hammer being set... I snapped my head around, but it was just the sound of a classmate shutting their metal pencil box.

S-so similar!

Since such things were linked to many cases of accidental shootings, at Butei High we were told to curb such noises.

This is... no good.

Several people are staring at me with "?" looks on their faces. Even my neighbor Moe.

"..."

Unconsciously, I had moved my hand to where I used to carry my Beretta, but it was no longer there, so I withdrew my hand from inside my jacket and tried to act like nothing was wrong as I returned it to the desk and resumed the staring contest with my textbook.

The *Clack* of a desk and chair scraping the floor, the *Pop* of a marker being uncapped, and the distant *Ra-ta-tat-tat* of power tools sounded like a Jericho 941 pistol being cocked, the pin of a MK-3A2 concussion grenade being pulled, and the rapid fire of an MP5-A4 sub-machine gun, respectively.

Out of reflex, I reacted by raising my guard...Trying to keep still and control the irrational body movements, a strange sweat broke out on my forehead.

Relax Kinji. These are everyday sounds. You are a normal high school student. A bullet isn't going to come flying out of nowhere. Don't worry, everything is fine. Focus on the lesson.

At lunch time, I thought to check in on how Reki was doing... But due to those noises, I am completely exhausted. It feels like the exhaustion that comes after finishing a battle in ASSAULT, so I went to the cafeteria and bought a sweet bun and some milk that I washed it down with as I sat at my desk.

"..."

Since making conversation isn't my forte, I kept quiet and listened to the conversation going on around me. The topics were surprising:

Television Idol gossip.

The latest fad diet.

Which McDonald's hamburger they liked best.

How to hide their mobiles from the teachers during class.

Bad-mouthing some classmate whose suspension had just been lifted.

—All frivolous topics. They spoke of nothing else.

Well, such conversation went on at Butei High. Such idle chatter was encouraged. Such talk, however, was merely garnish for professional communication between colleagues. The main topics were weapons, money, jobs, and fights. Our futures, how we would live, no, how we would make a

living—that was the real issue. We earnestly discussed those things because they were vital to our survival. But here there is no talk of jobs. If there is, it is only to the extent of getting a part-time job to earn some extra cash. On the surface, it seem like they don't think any of what they are saying is of much importance. It's like a garden of idle chatter.

For that reason, I soon felt like I couldn't enter their circle. How can I say it...? It all seemed so childish, and it seemed like they had all been sheltered from the real world. Like they were in their own little, isolated miniature garden world.

As I realised this outlook on the world was not one to which I could acclimate myself... from the side of the room, Class Representative Moe looked at me with with a little concern.

In the end, I couldn't talk to anyone after all, and I went home after school.

...I'm exhausted. Even though I only sat quietly. Apparently at Moe's prompting, a group of guys invited me out to Karaoke, but I declined on the excuse that I was tired. I'm an idiot.

I fell into a bout of self-loathing as class ended. Without my gun, I feel like my balance is off, and I went downstairs. The bulletin board on the wall had a sign 'To prevent the Flu, gargle with salt-water' posted on it like the symbol of the school's peace and harmony. There were no 'Do not illegally modify your weapons!' posters or savage things like 'Severe punishment has been decided for the person who bugged the MASTER's night-duty room' or 'Big sale of surplus US Military equipment!' on hand bills.

It feels like some kind of parallel universe... it has to be...

"...!"

I sensed someone had crept up behind me and moving my body out of conditioned reflex, I whirled around.

Fwip

I aimed a preemptive blade-like strike with my arm at their windpipe...

"...!"

Surprised, I stopped cold. The breeze created as I raised my arm to strike... gently ruffled Moe Mochizuki's soft hair, causing a few strands to flutter.

"...? ...?"

Moe was holding her school bag in both hands in front of her and stood there blinking for a while. Luckily, I recovered first and quickly offered an excuse.

"S-sorry. There was a fly, and I just... swatted it."

I offered an apology.

"Tohyama-kun, what clubs were you in at your last school?"

I transferred at a strange time, so she was probably curious about the mysterious transfer student. Moe asked this as we were changing shoes.

"Well...really, I didn't participate in many."

"So is there anything that you want to know about?"

Moe must be super curious.

No, she must be feeling the responsibility of a class representative. She must have noticed the air of loneliness around me and want to do something about it as soon as possible. Gori pushed that job onto her after all.

I just want to get out of here, because I'm tired, but...

I feel bad about almost snapping that small neck of hers, so I'll walk with her for a bit.

"As for me. I'm in the Housekeeping Club. We don't have any boys, but... T-Tohyama-kun, how do you feel about cooking?"

Huh? Was that an invitation?

But why did she stutter when she called my name and turn away, dropping her gaze to the ground? Her soft white cheeks tinged slightly red. In the normal world, does inviting someone to your club require so much bravery?

"It's an all girl club, so it might be a little... awkward."

"Oh, yeah... T-that's right!"

Moe said as her bushy eyebrows began to droop bashfully.

Whoosh

A wintry gust of wind blew and *Fwish*

...!

The wind lifted her plaid skirt up a bit to touch her ordinary blazer, and I looked away.



"N-no! That wind! It caught me by surprise!"

At Butei High, all of the girls show off their legs year-round, but even though the wind had only uncovered a little, Moe was embarrassed.

I had turned a little red too. How.. soft her thighs looked. They weren't fat in any sense of the word, but the muscle-to-fat ratio of the girls at Butei High was totally different. How to say it... they were nicely rounded, and because of that, they struck a new chord of interest.

...Oi! Why are you thinking about such weird things, Kinji!?

At Butei High...you couldn't exactly say that I didn't cause any trouble... but that's not the reason I was expelled! The headmaster himself signed off on it! But if I caused a problem (For example: Hysteria Mode) and was expelled from this normal school, I wouldn't have anywhere else to go!

I absolutely cannot let down my guard. Even here. Girls are dangerous. At least for me...

As I exited the school gate with Moe, a girl who was truly dangerous in several ways, Reki, was spaced-out and waiting for me. On her school bag, where normal girls would hang a stuffed animal... she had attached her dismounted sniper rifle scope. Well... It's not like the average person would recognise it, so it's fine, I guess. At her side, Haimaki was sitting like a stone lion temple guardian.

Apparently unable to do without them, Reki wore her headphones, and after hurling a pointed glance at Moe, she shot me a silent reproach with her eyes. What was that for?

"How did it go, Reki?"

"Nothing in particular. And you, Kinji-san?"

"The same."

And so the meaningless conversation between 'Silence'–Reki–and 'Gloom'–me–ended after 5 seconds.

Although I'm completely tired out... Reki is calm and composed. She seems not to understand the meaning of fatigue. She must have some kind of mental

hardening against tiredness. As expected of a sniper.

Reki then cast another sullen glare in Moe's direction.

"Ah, umm... See you later, Tohyama-kun!"

Making a disappointed face for some reason, Moe hurried away.

As Reki and I walked side-by-side, the other students on their way home were casting furtive glances after us.

Is it so unusual for two people to walk together? That's Basic Safety 101. There are some things in the normal world that I don't get it at all.

Leaving school, we reach Meiji Street.

"You're quick with your hands. As I thought."

Oddly, Reki began the conversation, giving me the same reproachful glare as she did before.

"Are you misunderstanding what just happened with Moe? She chose to follow me on her own, that's all."

I answered, but Reki gave no sign. She's pretending not to hear anything she doesn't like.

"Besides that... Were you able to make any friends? It seems to be impossible for me."

"I was."

Surprised, I asked her about it, and apparently all of the girls in her class think she is so adorably cute that she is already quite popular. She was like a small, quiet, lovable pet. Already loved by her fellow school girls, she has been accepted into the Art Club.

Apparently my social skills are worse than Reki's...!

Leaving me amazed, Reki trotted away from my side to a set of coin-operated lockers in the corner of a side street, and took out a suitcase from a vertical locker. It was her old friend—her Dragunov rifle.

"You... shouldn't keep something like that in such a place. And you shouldn't have brought Haimaki either. Leave him at home. It would be a big problem if he bit someone. Don't carry around any guns or blades. It's against school rules anyway."

Feeling that the case was heavy, I hefted it onto my back with one hand, resting it in my shoulder as I spoke.

"Understood, but..."

"But what?"

"Please be alert. I sense several people affiliated with The Wind. It might be a coincidence, but they are not far."

She said 'The Wind'. That was still stuck in Reki's head? Well, I'll return the favour and not hear anything I don't want to. I worked hard to quit that school and become a normal person. Words like that harboured nothing good. If it isn't going to do me any good, I'm not going to get involved. Right now, the most important things to me are my grades and relationships at school.

From now on, I will live in my parent's home, a little way away from the JR Sugamo station. The distance between my home and East Ikebukuro High is barely walkable. I wonder if they chose this school at Butei High because they knew that? Skirting the commercial district, we came to the residential area full of old stand-alone houses.

In an alleyway some kids were playing catch, a policeman was patrolling on his bicycle, and feral cats steered clear of each other... Rounding a tobacconist on the corner, going past a lumber shop, and walking a bit further on, we came to a traditional Japanese house— the Tohyama Family residence. Although old, it was pretty large.

It's been a while, hasn't it, since I've been home?

Going toward the door and rounding a corner...

"Oi! Gramps! I'm done sweeping the path. Teach me a secret technique."

Saying that, a guy dressed like a Rock singer went into my house...

T-that was... G... 3...! No... it can't be... What's going on...?

Doubting my own eyes, I rubbed my eyelids.

"Don't you know how to be a good neighbor!?"

Dressed in a kimono with a short traditional Japanese coat over it, stood my grandfather— Magane Tohyama. With a *Thwack* he struck G-3 on the head with his wooden getas, knocking him back out onto the path.

"You didn't sweep the path between us and our three neighbors! Next time I'll hit you with my fists!"

His all-white hair in a crew-cut, as my doddering grandfather 'Tsked', the savage G-3...

...Meekly picked up the broom. But the one straddling the fence, reaching out with a pole to knock down the persimmons...

"Ooh! This one is the colour of caramel!"

Wearing a Butei High sailor suit uniform... Ka-Kaname!

Slump

Thoroughly exhausted, I did not merely hang my head, but sank to my knees.

"Y-you... Why are you here...?"

Before greeting my grandfather, my lips voiced the extremely obvious question.

"Oh... Aniki! That's my line. I'm doing a home-stay."

"Onii-chan, you're so illogical. A granddaughter doesn't need a reason to visit her grandfather, does she? Ah, but relax. We didn't say anything to Aria and the others. We wouldn't want to ruin our little family reunion, would we?"

My younger brother and sister answered in a boldly American-style. G-3 was monitoring me. He probably had tapped the U.S. Military's ECHELON spy satellite he had told me about, borrowed it to track me down and then blabbed to Kaname who joined him.

It seems that after their huge fight and estrangement... they had looked back on things and made up afterward. Maybe, no... definitely, it was because of

me..

This... goes beyond all expectations...

I doubt anyone could have predicted this. The former political bodyguard—the Genion, G-3, sweeping up a path in Sugamo.

Still straddling the fence, Kaname gave me a wink, and with a sigh, I stood up... Keeping an eye on G-3, I walked up to the door with Reki, and to my grandfather I said...

"...I'm home."

Just that.

"Yes... It's good to have you back."

My grandfather... smiled happily. For that alone, I felt like it had been right to come home. But then my grandfather...

"Eh...? Is this pretty little thing *yours*?"

A lecherous glint in his eye, raising his pinky ² as he happily surveyed Reki's face.

"No, she came for her own reasons, but..."

"Hmm... The young girls are nice. E-hee-hee! She smells like mint, so I'll call her Mint-chan."

My grandfather was smelling Reki's scent with the pointlessly sharp sense of smell that I've inherited when...

"Oh, Kinji. Welcome home. That's a cute girl, isn't she?"

Booom!

Unnoticed, Setsu Tohyama had appeared—My grandmother—gave my grandfather a very strong short-punch³ .

With a 'Hrngh!' that could not be called a proper exclamation, my grandfather was blown across the street with a *Thud* and *Crack*... into a concrete block wall, sending blocks tumbling with the impact as the wall was broken.

Th-that was... Cl-'Clear Fall Water'...!

That is the first time I've seen it. It's a Tohyama Family secret technique. That was unexpected.

The power—the force behind it—in application, the amount of weight behind the blow it decides its velocity. In boxing, the force of a punch is limited to 'the amount of weight that can be carried in one arm' but with 'Clear Fall Water' 'no body weight is left unused' With that, what would such a blow become? Using almost no movement, a very strong short-punch can generate a massive amount of force. Just now, it was like my grandfather had been hit by a car.

In the Chinese art Kempo there are techniques known as 'Instant Strikes' that resemble this technique, but 'Clear Fall Water' takes this to another level. It looks like a punch, but actually, it's a technique that employs the whole body. It's something my Nii-san taught me when he explained that an 8 gram, 9mm bullet has so much power because of it's velocity—light, but fast.

'Clear Fall Water' is the opposite—slow, but heavy. My grandmother's weight is 40 kg—5,000 times more than a bullet. If you concentrate that into a fist for one punch, you'd only have to use a little speed.

Well, I understand the theory behind the technique, but.....

With theory alone, you couldn't kill a fly. Thanks to my grandfather's noble sacrifice, I finally had a front-row seat to catch how it was put into action.

I wonder if I can pull it off in Hysteria Mode...

"Oi, Gramps! You're making more work for me!"

G-3's angry voice was carried to us on the wind, as my grandmother...

"Come along, Kinji. There are bouquets of 'Golden Flowers' inside. You too Mint-chan."

Replacing both hands behind her hunched back, she strolled back into the house like nothing had happened. Grandmother... It seems that hearing I was coming home, she went out and bought them. Bouquets. When I was little, I liked those flowers, and apparently she still thinks I do. Rather, no matter how much time passes, in my grandparents' minds, I will always be a little kid.

"Well, I never knew that Konza had other children out there..."

"I don't think that Dad even knew, himself. Since Nii-san is alive, that makes us a family of 4 siblings."

I talked with my grandfather sitting at the kotatsu eating the sweet buns my grandmother had brought. By the way, he was totally unhurt. I could tell when he was faking it.

Being on the receiving end of Aria's daily domestic violence has only increased my stamina. In short, Hysteria Mode is easily triggered by angry women, so at least there are some positive side effects. My family are the carriers of this strange power.

By the way, before grandmother married into the Tohyama family (For some reason I was never told the full story), it seems that she belonged to a militant family. As a result, the Tohyama family were able to perfect their martial arts to a considerable degree.

...I can only hope this is not a bad influence on Kaname.

The rooms in this house, starting with grandfather's, are traditional Japanese rooms. Above the sliding doors of the room were some photographs of grandfather from his time in the army. On one of the walls of the room there is an alcove where a hanging scroll is displayed, beneath which grandmother's floral arrangements are placed. Somehow they remind me of the way Shirayuki does hers. They probably studied the same school's style.

"..."

By the way, Mint-chan—also known as Reki—was sitting formally with her knees under the kotatsu like a statue. She sat quietly like a life-sized doll. Reki gave off a feeling of discomfort as she sat, listening to us discuss private family matters without stirring...

"Well, looks like it will be a dead track this weekend."

Grandfather is a bone doctor⁴—cum-gambler with few patients left that somehow manages to make a living, and he is looking over a horse racing paper.

Thinking I would bring up the real reason I had come home I said...

"Grandfather, about school..."

Over the phone I had only given a brief summary, but grandfather's white crew cut was still in his paper.

"Well there's not much to say about it. Schools are like trains. You can transfer or even not get on. Konza came back crying when he was bullied. Even my grades were only third-rate. School doesn't suit a Tohyama man."

The conversation ended with such understanding and tolerance!

And I never knew that my Dad, nicknamed 'Demon Prosecutor' was such a cry-baby.

While those thoughts passed through my mind, Reki who had been silent for a long while, stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"The restroom."

"Uh... We have a traditional style toilet. Is that okay?"

Just in case, I warned her. She nodded. Just as Reki's footsteps faded into the distance... Grandfather put down his racing paper and red pencil.

"...A sniper, isn't she?"

He whispered.

It felt like a switch had been flipped in my grandfather's brain.

"That's right. You picked up on it quickly."

"I knew a while ago, I could smell the gunpowder."

So back then, he wasn't just harassing Reki.

"She has a pretty face, but I've never liked dealing with snipers. Too hard to handle in a fight."

"Agreed."

Once, I was completely defeated by one—by Reki.

"So... Did G-3 and Kaname tell you anything about themselves?"

I thought that I would have to explain, but...

"They didn't tell me anything. If they had given me some made-up story, I would have seen through it right away. They are part of the family. And they are well-trained. The older brother's main weapon is his fists, and the sister's is the katana, right?"

"You picked up a lot... Just by looking?"

"I see a lot about you too, Kinji."

He praised me with a smile of approval.

"Your face has become more manly. You've struggled your way through many battles and gone beyond the point of life and death."

"...Well, that's true in a lot of ways."

I gave a bitter laugh.

"Finally, you laughed. Since you've gotten here, you hadn't laughed."

My grandfather had noticed even that, and he laughed too.

To tell the truth... even though everyone at school likes to talk about comedians and celebrities, it's this kind of conversation that relaxes me. I feel like I can be myself. But I will become an ordinary person. I've come this far with that goal in mind. So I really shouldn't get too worked up about such conversations.

"Anyway, Kinji. You should be turning 18 this year. It's about time you learned... 'Spring Waterwheel'"

"Eh? Spring waterwheel? What's that?"

I asked, puzzled. Making sure grandmother was busy in the kitchen grandfather said...

"This is the number one secret of the Tohyama family. It's a secret technique, yes a secret technique..."

Lowering his voice while folding his newspaper, he took a safe out from deep within a closet.

Honestly, I knew that I should start living my life without thinking about

fighting techniques anymore, but.....

It was kept secret even from Grandmother—and the technique is kept hidden in a safe?

Just what was it? My curiosity couldn't help being piqued.

The safe made a grinding sound on the floor, and grandfather opened it with a *click*

"This is the 'Spring Waterwheel' that my grandfather developed from woodcuts. It evolved into the art of photography by yours truly. It took me a long time just to put it together, but I have been adding to the collection even before the war!"

What he took out from the safe, was a great number of.....

....Clippings from g-gravure magazines and swimsuit photobooks—whole pages of them...!

"Look, doesn't this girl's figure resemble that Hotogi girl? Ooheehee! Here is a western girl, and here is the Loli-series. Classifying them like this is the key to the spring waterwheel. After all, a man's taste in women will often shift and change or regress with time. And so to anticipate this—classify and preserve the photo-books, and cycle through various kinds of women according to your mood. Just like a spinning waterwheel!"

What the heck! This is embarrassing...

Speaking of it, I had completely forgotten. Grandfather was a total gravure idol addict.

He's already at this age, and he's still active..!

"When you put them away for a while and then look at them again, they acquire a fresh flavour. Even if you think you're tired of it, you mustn't ever throw one away!"

Gravure photos that had been carefully selected over the past few decades—such a dream-like sight was spread out on the tatami.

"Stop it... put them away!"

Though I had no interest in it or knew anything about it, but this kind of thing—w—when it was laid out to admire like this, there was a 'compulsion to appreciate' kind of feeling, that was even more dangerous!

"Kinji, you're reaching the age where you can boldly purchase adult goods. Recently there also have been cartoons you can choose from, your generation has even called it the '2D' treasure trove. Kinji! You must let your own 'Spring Waterwheel' grow and evolve, and always carry it with you in digital form!"

"No way I'm doing that!"

I accidentally glanced at the girl who did indeed look a bit like Shirayuki, wearing a swimsuit and in a suggestive pose, and couldn't help but be thoroughly panicked.

"Boy! Don't look away! Tohyamas freely 'transform'⁵ and become men!"

This 'transformation' is an old name for Hysteria Mode.

But because it sounded like 'pervert', nobody liked it, so it was given another name. Grandfather however, always boldly uses that name.

"Although young girls aren't bad, women really have to be over twenty for me. Look at this! Ooheehee."

Grandfather said such while spreading the great number of photographs on the floor like playing cards.....

Some people will never change. No matter how much time passes...

As for school—even after a few days, still nothing has changed. The end of the second semester is almost here.

The groups of guys have already been formed, and I wasn't in any of them. Because of that, there wasn't anyone I really talked to on any given day.

And ever since Moe saw me leaving school with Reki, I sense a strangely aloof attitude in her.

I didn't talk to anyone today either...

The high school on which I had pinned my hopes and dreams—had now

become a mentally bitter place.

Lunch break in particular, was especially difficult.

After all I couldn't just stare at people, but I didn't want to be like Reki and just blankly stare into space either. So I ended up reading the ingredients list on my empty pastry bag a good number of times. Just what am I doing?

So, today I planned to find somewhere besides the classroom to pass the time—

Wandering around school for a while, I realised that no matter where, there were always groups students around.

If I joined them, yet just sat there and said nothing, it would be too strange.

There's nowhere I fit in...

Back in Butei High, Tsuzuri always said I was 'asocial' and now that fact is quite clear.

Wandering around like this, I finally found an unclaimed spot—under the shadow of the roof's water tower. So I sat myself down there.

Lunch break still has thirty more minutes. Just what should I do?

Come to think of it, in the mail that Riko sent me, when Aria was in elementary school in London she truly didn't have a single friend.... so it seems she had a dark history of pretending to sleep in order to pass the time during breaks.

I'll try it. I'll also conveniently be able to get some sleep.

Just as I was thinking these resigned thoughts...

My sanctuary—the rooftop, had been invaded by someone.

Although I couldn't see them from where I was sitting, judging from the footsteps and voices, they should be a few female students.

"Tohyama, well..."

Hm? It sounds like they are talking about me!

Would it be better if I left this place? But, if I move from here, they'll notice.

It's not like I can hop the railing and rappel down.

Since they haven't noticed me... I'll just stay and really pretend to sleep.

"I've heard that he has a terrifying jagged scar on his arm. I heard the boys said they saw it during Phys Ed."

"How scary! Was he caught up in some machinery?"

"I've always felt that that guy must be hiding something."

Scar? Oh, when I was fighting with Sherlock the self-inflicted damage from the Ouka shock-wave left behind a scar.

Is that so strange? At Butei High, about the only the students without scars were the girls in CVR.

That said, could you please not use someone's physical appearances as a topic for conversation? If they were someone sensitive, they would feel hurt.

But.....it looks like everyone is secretly talking about me.

It isn't just the girls, and even the boys were talking behind my back too.

After school was also a hard time to bear for a loner like me.

When walking through school in order to go home, I would always see the figures of other students.

Everyone looked really happy. I don't understand what they were so happy just walking around, but I definitely got that feeling . The people in clubs, they exercised and sweat. The exceptionally studious ones left with their friends to cram school.

Only I had nothing to do.

Since tonight there would be no ASSAULT operations to join, or requests for rescue that would have me jump on one of LOGI's four-wheel drive vehicles. Even if I wanted to do some target practice to unwind, I no longer needed to. I had nothing at all.

So... this is a regular school, huh...

This place is exactly how I imagined it would be. The reason I couldn't fit in was my asocial personality.

However, besides this unbearable feeling—

Every day, nothing happened , nothing at all. It was actually very irksome.

You mean tomorrow, and the day after that, will all be like today...forever...? Is this what the normal world is like?

This was the kind of world I want.

Therefore, I should be feeling happy right now.

But, then why am I feeling so restless?

...This place, is too empty....

No, the empty one was actually me.

If not a Butei, I was nothing.

What remained was a hollow shell. I now painfully understood this.

Compared to the suffering I'm going through now, even the plane jacking incident was more relaxing.

Thinking about the plane jacking...

What were Aria and Riko doing right now? Shirayuki as well. Have they been given any jobs, exposed some scandal? I hope they haven't been in any danger.

While I was worrying about my companions, as I reached near the school gate—

...?

I think I heard someone arguing.

It came from the corner of the school grounds, near the bicycle parking area.

There were the belligerent voices of two boys....and the voice of a girl. Seems like the girl was being bothered by the guys.

"....."

Although my attention was arrested in that direction due to old habits, I

immediately decided to leave school quickly.

In this place what was most important in life was to not be too conspicuous. To avoid causing problems.

If I was caught up in some fight and use something I picked up at Butei High... I would be suspended, or maybe even expelled.

After all in a normal school, things like violent acts were a serious crime.

"–You aren't allowed to ride a motorbike to school...! The noise will bother people...!"

"Bother people? What did you say!?"

"We don't go to school! We're suspended!"

...I clicked my tongue.

The voice of that girl–was Moe Mochizuki, the girl who sat next to me.

Sizing it up, Moe had no fighting ability. None, zilch, nada.

The boys sounded very agitated. Were they about to get violent?

Dammit....What should I do!

I–although I decided to merely observe the situation, I couldn't help but walk towards the bicycle parking area.

There, I saw a mess of knocked down bicycles.....

"Fujikibayashi-kun, Asao-kun, at least put back the bicycles you knocked over..."

Moe said this while lifting her own bicycle.

"Alrighty~ then, Mochizuki, since you were so rude to me, you get a heavy fine. 100,000 yen⁶ . Fork it over or you'll get it!"

The bright gold-haired skinny guy with a pair of small tinted glasses and a bunch of earrings on, flashed a common switchblade that could be bought out of mail order magazine. Judging by Moe's line of sight, that should be Fujikibayashi.

"Hey, it's a bother to other people, huh? You pick them up then, Miss Class

Representative! "

Throwing a fried chicken bone onto the ground as he said this, the contrastingly plump one—by process of elimination—must be Asao.

His hair in a close cropped, doughnut-like shape, with rattling chains hanging from the edges of his uniform, he carried a metal bat. Near the two of them who wore tattered East Ikebukuro High uniforms....

What was that? It had a high windshield, a non-muffling stove-pipe muffler, and was covered in stickers. Originally it was a Kawasaki Zephyr, but it had been modified so many times that the performance of the bike had suffered.

If Mutou had seen it, he would have been angry.

I could tell at a glance that these weren't real thugs... they were 100% amateurs... but even that is dangerous.

Out of all these things I noticed, I was focused on one thing.

Fujikibayashi. That punk was pointing the glittering knife at Moe. It's no threat to me, but if he were to miss—there's the danger that he might stab Moe or himself.

Although I don't know what exactly he meant by 'You'll get it', since he drew it out, he plans to use it somehow, and I don't see him putting it away any time soon.

I can tell that he would be child's play for me. His grip is that of a complete amateur, but...

It is precisely because he is an amateur that something might happen. I've read incident reports where someone pulled out a knife in order to threaten someone and then went berserk and started stabbing people.

Just as Fujikibayashi grabbed the scared Moe's collar, and licked his knife with his long tongue—

Bastard! There's really no helping it.

"...Hey."

I reluctantly showed myself.

Right then... now how do I resolve this situation peacefully?

"...To, Tohyama-kun...."

Ah— Looking at me with suddenly teary eyes, Moe went ahead and blabbed my name.

"Huh? Who the hell do you think you are? Tough-guy?"

Holding the knife, Fujikibayashi wrinkled his eyebrows to the limit, and glared at me while tilting his head.

"Eh—I guess so. Put that shiny thing away."

I spoke with as level a tone as possible. But...

"This none of your business! To even suggest something to me, you're still ten billion light years too early!"

H-he suddenly snapped. Why?

Also, aren't light years units of distance? Looks like he's a bit thick in the head. Although, with my grades, I have no grounds to say that.

"Eh—? Another one showed up. Although I've never seen her before, she's wearing our school uniform."

Hearing Asao's rough voice, I turned my head to look—

Asao was using his fat hand to grab a hold of someone's head and drag them by their hair.

And that person whose hair he had grabbed and lifted with a single hand was...

Reki...!

That, that girl...

It seems that she guessed I had stuck out my neck and gotten into some trouble, so she came over here.

"S-stop! Those two just transferred to our school recently, don't be so rough with them!"

M-Moe... you even blabbed our entire life stories so easily...

But the problem now has become even more troublesome.

Reki, expressionless as always had allowed herself to be caught completely unarmed on my orders. And she was originally from SNIPE, so she also never learned hand-to-hand combat. At times like this, Haimaki would be truly handy, but he had been left at my grandparents' house.

"BOOYAH—! More girls!"

Boo...yah...? I can see you just wanted to shout that, Fujikibayashi.

But, that's good. This time his knife has turned away from Moe to Reki. Even though it's pretty far...

I'll make my move now.

"I said to put that away."

I said such, walking within the distance where Fujikibayashi could stab me.

"—Oh?"

Originally, I planned to grab his arm when he tried to stab me—but it seems Fujikibayashi doesn't have the guts to stab someone—he even let the knife tip point slowly backwards. Dammit, an amateur would totally do something so unexpected.

So I moved closer and pretended to grapple with Fujikibayashi...

"Whoa!"

Keeping a perfect margin of safety so no one would be stabbed, I kept control and pointed his knife hand toward Asao.

As expected, Asao got scared seeing the knife pointed at him—and released his grip on Reki.

He even dropped the metal bat he was holding, freaking out.

"..."

Then Reki... picked up the bat in her small hands. What are you planning to do to these amateurs? I could only use blink signals to tell Reki to 'escape', letting her abscond with the bat...

The knife I had already taken, and letting it fall to the ground, I kicked it into a drainage pipe. So now...

"–Oi! You won't get off so easy!"

"A brat like you, I'll kill you with a single punch!"

Now it should be alright if I let the noisy Fujikibayashi and Asao punch and kick me as they please, right?

That said... although they were punching and kicking me, I didn't feel under attack at all.

Instead of "*Boom!* *Thud!*" it was more like "*Slap!* *Poof!*".

Firstly, their posture was way too sloppy, and their transfer of body-weight inadequate.

The way they punched and kicked was even more disappointing. I had to be careful not to let them sprain their wrists or ankles as they hit me, and that was extremely difficult.

"S-s-stop!!!"

Witnessing this farce, Moe still cried out desperately. I wanted to burst out a with laugh, but since that wouldn't be too good, I held it in.

"Hah, hah... now..."

"Huff, huff... Learned your lesson yet?"

Eh...don't tell me...you're out of breath already?

Not even three minutes have passed...

But, these two really did look exhausted, and it was from trying to beat someone up.

"Yeah. I understand. I'm sorry about that."

I replied...

Crap. I should have pretended to get beaten up a bit more, if I don't these two won't be satisfied and leave. After all, there are girls watching.

"Take this! This move'll kill ya!"

Fujikibayashi slowly turned his back toward me and made some distance between us...Oh, is he planning to get some running distance?

Dragging his feet, he ran towards me, planning to give me a flying kick.

So taking on the role-of-a-lifetime act, I had to be careful not to hurt myself while managing to make trick my opponent into thinking he had 'finished it'–

–*Wham!*

I let him kick me.

Then I pretended to be knocked backwards. Using the knocked down bicycles to cushion my fall, I crashed with a *Whoom!*

"...Uu..."

I even especially included sound effects. It may have been a little over-the-top with the moaning, but the message was clear—I've lost. Since my loss to Hilda at Sotobori, this was my most obvious defeat.

Thinking about it, I couldn't help but want to laugh again, but I have to restrain myself.

"Fujikibayashi! Asao!—You're suspended! What are you doing!?"

Just then, from the staff room came Gori's loud voice.

He must have been watching what was going on from the beginning through the window. So it turns out he was waiting until Fujikibayashi and Asao were tired out before doing anything? As expected of a working adult. He is truly wise in the ways of the world.

"....Asao, let's scram. Oi, Tohyama, you'll regret this. Just you wait, we'll make you pay!"

With great difficulty, the puffing Fujikibayashi started up the heavily modded motorcycle with difficulty and left with tottering Asao.

You'll regret this...huh?

In Butei High, that phrase—originating from mercenary jargon—signified a deep affection for someone.

It meant: Live until we can meet again.

I couldn't help but laugh bitterly inside, and when I opened my eyes...I saw Gori scowl as he closed the window turning back toward his desk.

"A-are you alright? Tohyama-kun! Tohyama-kun.....Tohyama-kun! Tohyama-kun-!"

Suddenly released from the tension, Moe fell down and clung to me like a victim rescued from a snowy mountain, repeatedly calling my name.

That said, why are you crying about... what happened just now...?

Although I was thinking that, unfortunately, I had to keep up the act.

After all, if a normal person had just been beaten up, they would be in pain, and it would appear strange if I appeared to be fine.

"Ah, ouch!...It really hurts."

H-how's that? I should stagger a bit for good measure.

Moe said "Let's go to the infirmary!" and was going to lend me a shoulder, but I picked up my bag and made an excuse about going home. And like that, it was settled.

—That said... although it was no big deal... I felt a little happy.

So it turns out a regular school also has lively people. Although they were suspended.

No no no, Kinji, if you get interested in that kind of stuff, you're finished.

If they were just a bit stronger, it could have at least counted as a massage.

I was thinking this while letting the sobbing Moe calm down— and after we said our goodbyes...

".....Hey, Aniki. Want me to 'take care' of those two?"

Just then, my younger brother who was concealed in his photo-refractive camouflage coat, whispered into my ear.

"Idiot, cut it out! No matter what, they're still human. Don't kill people."

I warned him, pretending I was talking to myself.

As a matter of fact he had been there for a while. He had arrived in the

middle of the scene, but because the meaning of it was so uncertain, he had merely observed from the nearby wall.

"I don't get you at all, you're so strange, Aniki. What the hell were you doing?"

"Fine, I'll explain it to you. It's called student life, and if you mess it up, I'll end you."

"Humph. What the hell is that?"

"Oh, and from now on stop following me. I've never heard of a younger sibling being overprotective of an older brother."

"By the way, let me make it perfectly clear that I haven't been following you because you haven't been lively lately. It's something else."

"Why is it that you tsunderes always manage to blurt out the truth while rambling on?"

I asked and...

Step *Step* *Step* *Step* *Whoosh!*

G-3 easily jumped and cleared the wall to the outside of the school. His steps more amateur-ish than Asao or Fujikibayashi's.

I suddenly realised there were a lot of footprints on the ground. They wanted to be real tough guys, but they only managed to worry about themselves.

Later— I joined Reki who was still holding the metal bat and attracting a lot of stares, in front of the school gates, and throwing it away, we walked home side-by-side.

After that... I got the impression that Reki was walking somewhat closer to me than usual.

"...Thank-you for what you did."



Reki suddenly thanked me.

Reki never thanks anyone. This is rare.

"What for?"

"Kinji-san saved me."

"O-oh! You don't have to thank me for that. It couldn't even be called a fight."

"No, that's not it. You want to hide your past identity. I understand that. But even so, you faced the danger that it might come to light— and you fought to protect me."

Well... That is kind of what happened.

"Ah...Moe Mochizuki was there too."

Suddenly Reki looked up and shot me a sidelong glance that looked a bit angry.

Despite the fact that she just thanked me.

What's this? It's a little scary.

1. Short for 'gorilla'.

2. This somewhat sexist gesture is used by men to indicate or ask if a girl is another man's girlfriend, lover, or wife. Kind of a bro-code to see if she is 'taken'.

3. Seems to refer to a superpowered one-inch punch.

4. A 'bone doctor' is a Japanese non-professional medical profession that treats minor injuries and can set broken bones. These 'doctors' also integrate some primitive chiropractic care and massage into their treatments along with some folk medicine. Kind of like first-aid crossed with a witch-doctor. There is no set literature for bone doctors to study, so the treatments beyond simple care can vary widely. I know traditional dojos would usually have one on hand to set the students broken bones and treat injuries in place of a certified doctor.

5. The word is 'hentai' It uses different characters (change-body/form rather than strange/twisted-person) but uses the same pronunciation.

6. 100,000 yen is, ~830€, and just shy of 900 USD.

Chapter 3: Moe Mochizuki

The next day, as I took my seat in class...

"To-Tohyama-kun. About yesterday..."

Before lessons began, Moe started talking to me.

"Yesterday?"

"Uhm... at the bicycle parking... uhm"

Oh, she's talking about when I was beaten up. At Butei High, it was pretty much a daily occurrence (especially from Aria) and I learned to live with it, so I had already forgotten.

But it's not something that happens in a normal school.

"..."

Her large eyes brimming with tears, Moe looked at me with an expression of profound gratitude.

W-what should I say at a time like this?

I can't say 'It was fun!'—that would be too weird. Unable to find the right words, Moe and I continued in nervous silence.

And then class began... Ultimately, It looked like I had ignored Moe.

I have since accustomed myself to the noises of everyday life, but as for my studies... I can't seem to find my bearings. They don't match the speed of the slowest student, so the lessons I don't understand just keep moving on. So when they are talking about something I don't understand... I get sleepy.

In practicality, this happens several times, and Moe wakes me with the back of her mechanical pencil. It was cute the way she would look out for me, each time giving me a smile and a silent 'Hey!', doing something that cute... for some reason I didn't understand.

At last, at lunch that day I had no appetite because of the stress of a lesson I

didn't understand... I couldn't fight the drowsiness any longer and slumped completely over my desk.

In the end, I'm really becoming like the elementary school Aria.

After school, since Reki had Art Club, I went home alone.

That girl is good at sketching. I wonder if she can paint too?

Since the atmosphere of school is oppressive, in order to restore my mental balance... I headed to the East Ikebukuro Central Park to sit on a bench and kill some time.

This little park's slice of the urban landscape barely had any visitors, and it was a great out-of-the-way place to be alone.

I could watch the falling leaves dance in the air, with only nature for a companion. As I thought these old, retired man thoughts...

"Bianca, don't do that."

I heard a soft, but troubled voice.

Ugh...

It was Moe's voice.

What is she doing here?

Turning around I saw her walking a beautifully silky Collie, or rather... it was walking her.

The unhappy Moe was wearing a coat and a long skirt, and we had meet by chance like one of those stupid setups from a drama. Immediately I thought about running away.

"T-Tohyama-kun!?"

Her double-lidded eyes opening wide, Moe turned around in surprise. Her face said: 'It's a miracle!'. Certainly in a large metropolitan area, the chances of meeting someone you know are rather slim, so it might seem like a miracle.

Certainly it was one I did not wish to happen.

Bringing her large dog with her, Moe walked over.

"...You live near here?"

It was a natural question, and one I couldn't help but ask.

"Yup."

"Well, I guess it's not really such a miracle after all."

I said.

"So you thought so too. But it's still a little bit like a miracle, don't you think?"

Moe said with a smile that would charm the world.

"Oh, so To-Tohyama-kun, wait here one moment. Bianca, sit! Sit! S-I-T!"

And not waiting for a response, Moe left Bianca in front of my bench as she dashed off toward Sunshine City with the *Ta* *Ta* *Ta* of her footsteps and the little woolen balls on the edge of her scarf trailing behind her.

"..."

I thought that this would be a good opportunity to escape... but there are a lot of cars in the area. I have to watch Bianca and make sure she doesn't run away, so I can only wait.

Ta *Ta* *Ta*

Running in a way that belied a lack of fine motor skills, Moe returned carrying two McDonald's bags.

"Here, this is for you."

"...?"

"..."

"You didn't eat anything for lunch today. I'll eat with you."

Moe said as she handed me the warm paper bag.

I surely didn't eat anything today. She noticed that... Well, she does sit next to me. And true to that description, *plop* she sat beside me on the bench.

Sitting in a park, eating McDonald's...

Come to think of it, when I met Aria, we ate together like this, but this time the circumstances are totally different.

Back then she made me treat her then punched me, the savage.

This time I am the one being treated, and heaven and earth would crumble if this angelic girl could punch anyone.

The smell of the food in the bag was intended to awaken human appetite, and my hunger swiftly returned.

"I'll gladly accept it. Thank-you."

I opened my bag and then Moe opened hers.

So she will not eat before me? This is a girl who has been raised with noble manners.

That real aristocrat Aria would just open it and begin to eat as soon as she got it.

I guess birth and manners aren't necessarily connected.

We ate a little, then looking across at me with an apologetic face, Moe spoke.

"About yesterday... I'm sorry for leaving. Afterwards, I started worrying about you so I went back to school, but Yada-san was standing by the gate holding a bat and scowling, so I went back home."

Yada-san? Oh, She means Reki. I forgot her last name, even though I had given it to her, but no matter what, Reki will be Reki. Why would Reki scowl at this person who couldn't hurt a fly?

"I... to think there are those who will punch, kick, or be violent... I can't believe there are such people."

Moe puffed out her soft cheeks.

Thinking about it, I lost the fight yesterday (or so it seemed). I think this is her way of saying she was worried about me.

"Yeah, what's it good for anyway?"

Although I, a Butei, am the living embodiment of violence—I matched her opinion... I had already finished eating, so I wiped the grease off my hands with a

napkin.

If my hand slipped on the trigger and I missed a shot... No, I shouldn't be worrying about things like this. I don't carry a gun.

"You eat quickly. You must have been hungry."

Moe said giggling with a smile... That gets me. That warm smile of hers is really too cute. That smile was 100% sure to make anyone happy.

"While eating—"

'—The risk of attack is high, and your hands are occupied so you should eat quickly' I almost said, but I choked it back.

So. Eating quickly is yet another Butei habit, I'll have to stop.

After that, a short time passed in silence.

"Erhm, Tohyama-kun. Last night... I was worried after I went home... Because I didn't thank you properly... So, if there's anything I can do... please let me show my gratitude."

Wow! What a proper thing to say! Reki thanked me one minute and the next shot me a death glare.

But 'thanks'...

Watson forced her own kind of 'thanks' on me, and for Butei, fighting in a battle like yesterday (If it could be called that.) incurred a certain obligation that was repaid in money or goods used to complete other jobs. But I don't what kinds of thing a normal person should ask for.

"Well then, how about this food from McDonald's?"

That could count as 'money or goods'. It cost several hundred yen. That seems like a fair price for that charade.

"Well..."

Moe's expression looked disappointed.

What is this...? When she said that she wanted to thank me, did she mean something else? This probably isn't a trap... so...

As I pondered this silently, Moe glanced over at me and caught my eye.

"Uhm... Sorry for asking, but... To-Tohyama-kun... are you and Yada-san together?"

Huh? How did you come to that conclusion?

"Not at all."

I replied, and Moe abruptly turned her face away... and making a triumphant face... squeezing her teriyaki burger and making a victory pose.

I didn't understand the meaning of this series of actions, but one thing is for sure... This girl lives in a world that is the complete opposite of the Butei world.

She even thinks that talking to and warning punks enough times will get them to change their ways. Although she isn't quite the absolute pacifist that I am, I get the feeling that she is an angel from Heaven sent into this world.

The way she acts is full of opportunities to be taken advantage of... but she is a good girl. And cute too.

I was thinking this and...

Ponk!

An acorn fell from somewhere and hit my head. But there are no trees nearby.

"...?"

I thought it was some brat from the park, but looking around there was no one in range.

Who could have done it? To sneak up and snipe a Butei without a giving sign of their presence.

Having finished her hamburger, Moe sipped her small iced coffee as she said...

"I don't have a boyfriend... A-although I do dream about having one..."

Moe stole another glance at me.

What's this? Why does this girl always talk about things that I'm not good at talking about.

"You shouldn't have a problem with that."

I said what I honestly thought, but for some reason, Moe looked disappointed. Well... Maybe I should encourage her a bit more.

"...I hope you find someone soon."

I said, and Moe lowered her soft bob cut head in embarrassment.

"You too..."

Alright... That's settled.

"To-Tohyama-kun, do you have someone like that?"

"I'm alright for now."

—because I have this incurable disease, Hysteria Mode.

"Your defence is strong..."

Moe broke her gaze and turned back to the coffee in her hand.

Did she see through me when I was attacked yesterday...?

As I was taken a little aback, Moe's face lit up.

"How are you studies? Are the lessons very different from your previous school?"

Extremely different.

"Hard. To be honest, I can't really keep up."

To be honest, my grades are a real problem.

Hearing the truth, Moe made an 'I did it!' expression.

"Well... I go to a cram school, and on the recent national New School Exams I placed 89th."

What a coincidence! Recently, I asked Watson about the national S.D.A. rankings—commonly known as the superhuman ranking—and when I stopped being human, I was given the rank of 89th in Asia.

But 89th in the National Exams is amazing. Moe must be smart.

"Then would you like me to teach you one of these days? My best subject is

Modern Japanese."

As Moe said that...

...!

...What's that?

I feel someone watching me. Who is it?

It's not someone in any honest line of work. Maybe a Butei.

"S-so?"

I heard Moe's answer and..

"Yeah."

I gave a vague answer as I scanned the surroundings. My sixth sense had been triggered, but apparently the other person had noticed and erased all trace of their presence.

They're good...

This guy is a first-class professional.

"A-alright then. Please give me your mail address!"

Across from me, Moe took out her mobile that was decorated with a strap made of clear beads.

If I move unnaturally, that will be more dangerous. I have to act natural. So I exchanged contact info with Moe with the infrared...

Overly happy, Moe left with Bianca, and I watched her go... The one who was watching me seems to have gone, so I left as well.

Since someone was following me, I decided to go home by a different route, making a detour. Just to be safe, I boarded a metro bus to try and lose my tail.

"..."

But as soon as I got on, I came face-to-face with my pursuer.

He was sitting in a two person seat, and I greeted him with a broad grin. He tapped his fingers on the empty seat beside him, but even if he didn't I would have sat down.

"What are you wearing, Shiranui?"

I grumbled to Shiranui who was sitting on the seat next to me and wearing an East Ikebukuro High uniform.

His skills must have gotten better. That display just now was amazing. If he had a sniper rifle, I would have been shot.

"Is this a good place to talk? You make the call."

That male beauty smiled at me. That is the captivating look that always makes me angry.

"Not really. There are other passengers."

And depending on how things go, it might come to fists.

We got off in front of the Municipal Art Museum and—still smiling, Shiranui suggested we talk inside. I wasn't really interested in seeing the Venetian Exhibit, but we went in together...

Inside, there were many pieces of stained glass on display at the front... In a corner, there were pink shell cameos to rival the ones in Aria's guns, and Shiranui stopped. There's no one around.

"You sure took the long way around. If you have something to say, just say it."

Pretending to look at the cameos, I broke the ice sullenly.

"You must really be bored at that school. I've been here since last week. I've infiltrated for an investigation. And you didn't even notice!"

Shiranui said as he lightly poked my blazer. I only half turned, but he still has that smile on his face. As always, no matter what he does, he always looks cool.

"—What investigation?"

"How about an info swap? What are you doing, Tohyama?"

"....."

"Kidding~! Trade secret: It's best to keep your client's info confidential."

Shiranui flashed another smile.

I could strangle him.

"There's always been a part of you that's arrogant. You're really cut out to be a Butei."

"You flatter me!"

"How is it going for you at that school? It must be hard for you to get along?"

When there is a person who doesn't want to talk about themselves, you should get the chatting. Then they might let something slip.

It's a technique I learned at INQUESTA, but I don't know if it will work on him.

"Alright. I manage. But the girls... are a little troublesome. They keep wanting to talk with me, but I'm not that good with girls."

"I always thought it was strange how similar we were, but even in that we're equally bad."

"Tohyama-kun, I never thought that you'd say such a thing!"

"I won't beat you because I don't feel like it."

"Haha! I'm saved. But, Tohyama, this might be your last chance with a normal girl."

"...What do you mean?"

"Just that, Tohyama-kun!"

He's smiling for some reason.

Dammit, Shiranui has always liked to talk.

He's a mysterious sort of guy.

"Just that it might be nice if you got in touch with Kanzaki-san once in a while. She seems to be taking it out on the Kouhai¹. I feel bad."

As is to be expected of a good man. He cares about his juniors.

Rather, this is because Aria can't vent her frustrations on me anymore.

"That's all I wanted to say."

"That's it!?"

"That's right. Oh, and about later... Tohyama, I don't want to get in the way of your job, so if you see me at school, I want you to talk to me casually."

"You too."

Well, I guess the world is a small place after all. Such things happen from time to time.

As people I know from Butei High move from place to place for jobs, there is a chance they might meet while working the same job.

Fortunately this isn't a real job—so I probably won't have to fight Shiranui. I wouldn't want to fight my friend anyway, because he's one of the best in ASSAULT, unlike me the drop-out.

Ever since I transferred out of ASSAULT, I've felt that Shiranui and I have become steadily more different.

At Butei High, there are a lot of people who bulk up on extra muscle, and I can tell he's done the same by the way he moves.

If I had to fight without Hysteria Mode, there's a 70% chance I would be subdued.

But I don't have to worry about those calculations anymore. I've quit Butei High.

"Even though it might be a breach of contract, I'll tell you. I probably won't have to fight you."

"I'm relieved to hear it. I want to remain friends as well. "

That was a little bit of a lie, since what I said made it sound like I had a job at East Ikebukuro—

As for Shiranui... He left before me, going out the back of the Museum and waving his hand goodbye.

So flashy... I can't ever get a read on him. He hasn't changed. The world makes allowances for good looking guys.

Life is so unfair.

Although I wanted to do a bit of studying that night.... Kaname roped me into playing Shogi with her. Endlessly...

Gran had taught her the rules, but for someone who just learned, she's ridiculously good. She's already made me resign 9 times.

"Onii-chan, that move was illogical. I'll fork your Rook and put your King in check, then I'll take your Rook with my Bishop²."

"Ugh..."

What could I, a high school drop-out, do to fight back against a Genion who had already finished university?

What's more, she's sitting seiza³ in her usual sailor suit uniform and short skirt. Her exposed thighs are right in front of me and for some reason, there's a gap between her knees.⁴

"What's that matter? are you sweating, Onii-chan?"

Since it's embarrassing to notice, when Kaname moves and I catch sight of a strange bit of cloth, I get nervous and then she strikes. It has to be some kind of off-board tactic.

But I'd have to hyster-ise in order to win, and if I did that with my little sister,—if Arcanum Duo was activated—it would bring about the collapse of my family.

If my grandfather ever found out what had triggered my Hysteria Mode, he'd certainly disown me.

I'd have to forsake civilisation and elope with Kaname.

My life would be over.

"...I give up, you win."

"Heh heh heh! That's 10 games in a row! Oh! You have a call coming in, Onii-chan."

Kaname pointed to my mobile on the cushion beside me.

Yes! I can use this as an excuse to quit Shogi.

Or so I thought, but it was only a text message... I'll pretend it's a phone call.

"Rght then, go take a bath and get to bed. It's late."

"Alri~ght..."

Kaname raised a hand and began clearing up. I left Kaname's room and went back to my own.

I changed into my pyjamas and turned out the lights, intending to go to sleep...

Then I remembered my mobile... Well, I could at least call. Shiranui asked me to.

So I dialed Aria.

"Kinji?"

Her voice was overly happy.

"Aria, you shouldn't bully your juniors, you know."

"Wha-? Who told you that?"

"My source's life isn't that cheap."

"Their life isn't in danger, so tell me. I mean... things haven't been fun since you left... Ah...! It's n-not like that means anything! I-I-I don't like you or anything... Th-that's n-not wh-what I m-meant! No~o...!!! I'll open a wind hole! In your ugly face!"

Wha! It seems I'm an expert in making Aria lose her cool. Now she's yelling. She was in a good mood when she answered the phone.

Ugly...? I know my face is gloomy, but still...

"Hey, why are you making calls in the middle of a job anyway? What if it was intercepted? Japanese communications are pretty secure, but the room or mobile might be bugged. Did you think of that? You're pretty stupid for a Butei. In the first place... *Blah* *Blah* *Nag* *Nag*"

That's Aria for you... I sighed.

For some reason I felt relieved even though I was being scolded, but at least I was able to make sure she was safe.

At least it seems I don't have to worry about her.

Even so, that crack about my face riled me, so after she had gone on ranting for about 30 minutes...

"Okay then. The latest weather forecast calls for snow. Snow clouds can show up anytime with lightning. The people who live in Japanese thunderclouds will steal your belly button, so make sure you cover it!⁵"

"Huh? Hold on! Really?"

Right. She heard about lightning and panicked. Retrieving the mobile she had dropped, her voice was louder again.

Now for my counter-strike.

"You've heard about them, right? Everybody knows. By the way, if they steal your belly button, you'll turn into a reptile."

"But I wear my sailor suit— Do you think my belly button will be uncovered!? Wait! What should I do if a thunderstorm suddenly appears? Tell me a good way to protect..."

Click

I ended the call.

Heh heh heh! Now have a dream where you turn into a lizard. Then when Mamiya or someone chases you, cut off the tail that sticks out from your skirt and run away.

Huh...

I have an unread message. I got it after the game of Shogi.

Checking—it was from Moe.

'I'm glad we talked today. Have a good night!'

She wrote.

If I damage the relationship between me and the girl who sits next to me in school, life will only become more difficult, so...

'Good night.'

I replied. Less than a minute later, there was a response.

'Would it be alright to message you tomorrow?'

Came the question.

'That's fine'

I answered.

It'd be a pain if she was a message fiend like Shirayuki, but that's silly. Moe is a good girl.

Now that I'm thinking about it, the day I gave Shirayuki my mail address, I was shocked to suddenly receive 100 messages.

On top of that, if they were put into a book, they would have taken up more than two whole pages. The next day I scolded her, but still the experience makes me shiver.

Now that I think about it... it's sort of embarrassing.

We aren't working a job or fighting together, but I have this girl's mail address in my mobile. And I'm letting us talk about trivial things back and forth like we're close friends. Even though there's no reason for us to be talking.

Although I thought that, Moe didn't seem to think so. After school the next day, Moe sent another text.

I had just given her a casual OK at the park yesterday, but it looks like Moe really is willing to help me with my homework—

I've been invited to her house on Saturday.

The biggest problem I currently faced was that I couldn't keep up with the lessons.

Although transfer students keep the credits they have already earned, the normal lessons I had taken in Butei High were not really very similar. If things went on like this, it would be hard for me to transfer schools, and I might have to drop out again.

Although having a girl for a teacher is not a good thing... I can't be picky. I'll

ask her to teach me.

So, on the chilly Saturday morning—

As I left my house...

Ponk!

I was hit again on the head by an acorn again.

I looked up and saw a tree in the courtyard, but acorns don't fall from persimmon trees.

"...?"

This is like a petty paranormal event.

But, I've already seen enough things like this from the people of IU that I don't want to see anymore. This small a thing can't scare me.

Alright, let's go study. So I headed to the address Moe sent me.

That has to be it.

We agreed to meet at 10.00... 5 minutes before that, I saw it—a house that could not be called anything but normal. But with a modern flair.

Although it was small, I got the feeling it was expensive.

"...Ah! Tohyama-kun!"

Standing out in the cold, breathing into her numb hands to warm them... Moe was waiting. Seeing me, her face lit up brightly.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"No, no it's fine, I just got here myself."

Moe waved her hands rapidly in denial...

But she must have been waiting at least 15 or more minutes because her nose is already red with cold. Why did she lie?

Besides that, there is something strange about Moe's behaviour.

On top, she wore a knit yarn cardigan that covered everything except her cold fingertips. Underneath it she wore a thin pink and white blouse with a short

skirt that seemed too thin for winter. She wore a long skirt when we met in the park, and her hair seems a little different. Her bangs are a little larger.

"Even if it's only for a little while, a girl shouldn't be out in the cold. You'll catch a cold."

At that, Moe blushed, and I got the impression she was nervous.

"This is the first time I've invited a boy to my house... but I'll be fine. Don't worry about me. I've never missed a day since Kindergarten for a cold."

She tried like a child to keep up the pretense, but she couldn't hide the fact she had been waiting for a while.

I had always thought of her like she was from distant planet, but thanks to this, I feel a little closer to her.

Adjusting her nylons along the way, Moe led me into the house.

Inside, everything was normal... and not a whiff of gunpowder. There were no food or sweet wrappers that Riko had let fall strewn across the floor—unlike my old apartment, it was very neat and clean.

Since it was quite mild inside, Moe took off her cardigan. Underneath, her blouse was short sleeved so her soft skinned arms could be seen.

"Tohyama-kun, we have sandwiches, so if you're hungry just say so, alright? We have cake too."

After she said that, I looked over to the dining room table and there was a plate full of wrapped home-made sandwiches.

As expected from someone in the Housekeeping Club. She's very good.

"Say, I didn't know about it but... My mother and father went out on a trip today... They took our pet Bianca with them when they left, so there's no one else here. B-but that's fine. "

...? That's a little weird... Usually you know in advance if your family is taking a trip.

She knew quite well that her parents wouldn't be here... She's only

pretending she didn't know.

I can tell because she is a very honest person. But since we are only going to be studying, it will be alright. No problem.

Hmm... from what you said, I'm guessing you don't know? So I'll tell you.

"Well... there is someone here. Inside that closet, Saki-san... your little sister."

Thanks to my old INQUESTA habits, I noticed her as soon as I entered the room. I thought it looked like she was playing a game of hide-and-seek.

"Ehh~!"

Moe raised her voice in surprise.

"–Busted! But how did you even know my name, huh?"

Saying that the closet opened... Moe's small black twin-tailed little sister came out.

How did I know your name...? It's written on your nameplate. Your parent's names, 'Moe', and 'Saki'.

I was in INQUESTA so long that I developed this habit of making this check upon entering a house.

Unlike her sister Moe, Saki had an impish sort of look to go along with her cute face... She seemed to be a first-year in middle school, and she rushed over to me.

"Hmmm. A little gloomy, but he's good-looking. Now I get it, so this is the type of guy you like!"

Saying that with a wide smirk, she looked up at me.

"Saki, why you..!"

Wha-? That was unexpected. Moe is angry.

Although compared to Aria it's a ratio of 2000:1, she hit Saki.

"Saki, you dummy! Dummy, Dummy! I told you to go out and play today. "

Whomp *Whomp* *Whish!* *Whish!*

Moe chased Saki around, pummeling her with both hands repeatedly,

sometimes missing and catching nothing but air.

"You were so obviously trying to get everyone out of the house. you couldn't fool my great detective skills. I don't think Mama and Papa caught on, though. I don't know what kind of love advice you got, but how could I not notice when you took out your favourite make-up and wore a short skirt even though it's cold outside?"

Saki has very good reflexes. As she continued to tease Moe, she jumped over the sofa, but running after her Moe thudded into it and fell over.

"♪Big sister has a boyfriend!♪ ♪Big sister has a boyfriend!♪ ♪Big sister has a boyfriend!♪"

I finally understood that Saki was under a similar misunderstanding as Reki as she sang this made-up song. Retreating to a safe-zone behind me, Saki giggled and peeked out at Moe.

Frozen in embarrassment, Moe's eyes met mine...

"Dummy! Saki you dummy! Don't say such strange things in front of Tohyama-kun...! Please...!"

O-Oh...

Turning red, Moe began to cry and tried to hide her face with both hands.

She gone too far. Despite the fact that this is her house, I shot a look over my shoulder at Saki.

"S-Sorry... I'll be going out."

It looks like Saki is a good girl after all, and she pulled a trench coat out of the closet...

Walking over to her older sister, she began stroking her hair and whispered in her ear. Responding to something I couldn't catch, Moe nodded.

"Since you don't want me to say anything to Papa or Mama, give me 500 yen."

Moe paid the bribe. Now that she had paid, she wants everyone out of the house, and Moe began pushing Saki bodily toward the hall. Then Moe made

some kind of scratching motion with her hand at the back of her blouse.

What was that? It wasn't any kind of signal...

"O~oh! Since you're wearing your best clothes, you had to fix your bra! It's not the kind you normally wear. You must really like this guy! It's the expensive, cute one..."

Saki whispered impishly, (Not that I heard, but I read her lips), but that was a mistake.

Moe delivered another hammer punch that sent Saki's whole body sprawling.

Saki pulled on her sneakers. For some reason, she peeked under Moe's skirt.

"This matches what you have on top. Big Sis you're really fired up!"

Whispering inaudibly again, this time Moe responded with a kick...

Totally exhausted, Moe's kick managed to hit at just the right angle, and she finally forced Saki outside.

Moe's room was on the second floor, so she led me upstairs...

"I-I'm sorry. My little sister is a mystery novel-geek, so sometimes she likes to 'investigate' me, even though I've told her not to."

She said, but I wish you'd stop wearing mini-skirts. It puts me in all kinds of trouble when I have to climb the stairs behind you.

Having survived the ordeal of climbing the stairs, we came to a door that had a plaque with 'Moe' written on it in a fairy-tale script. Opening the door... We entered Moe's room.

Alright, finally. A place where I can study to my heart's content. And it even comes with a teacher.

Inside there was an almost murderous level of feminine sweetness and smells, but I'll deal with it.

So this is a girl's room...

On the bookshelves were volumes like 'A Christmas Carol', 'Wuthering

'Heights', and other girlish literature. There were also cooking, knitting, and over there, gardening books. By the bay window there was a music box and a stuffed teddy bear.

I've never seen this kind of room... except in a drama.

So they actually exist in this world—Places like this, overflowing with feminine kindness and charm.

There was a neatly organised desk, but apparently we won't be using it. In the centre of the small room there was a small round table. Around it...there were two 'U'-shaped handmade cushions that only intensified the feminine atmosphere.

"Then we'll get started right away..."

I sat on one of the cushions and pulled out my notebook from my full bag...

For some reason, Moe's hands were shaking. Down on all fours, she silently rummaged for something on the lower shelf of her bookcase and pulled out a huge photo album.

"..?"

"Uh-Uhm... Before we study... Can we look at this for a bit?"

She said coming up beside me. Moe came up close and sat seiza on her cushion next to me.

Wha-What is this? Y-you're so close...

Her bust was spreading her blouse open and her breasts... were huge! They're almost on the same level as Shirayuki...! So white and perfectly round...

The resemblance is uncanny...

If drew an analogy with warships, Watson and Reki are light cruisers, Kaname and Jeanne are heavy cruisers, and Riko is a battleship. Someone in Shirayuki's size class would be a dreadnought. By the way, Aria is a rubber life raft.

No matter how you look at it, this body has no discipline and is truly weak. Just like a soft tank⁶!

Thinking that and unable to decide between the warship or tank analogy,

inside my body...

Ka-thump

This is bad.

Hysteria Mode's blood flow began! Flustered, I looked down... but now I saw the thin skirt Moe was wearing even though it was winter. Sitting seiza next to me, I could almost see to the top of her white th-thighs!

"...Ugh..."

This is really bad.

My gaze darted up and down, taking in her entire figure, and Moe became embarrassed. But in spite of that, Moe did not fix her opening blouse or the short shirt that was moving upward.

If you're so embarrassed... Then don't sit next to me while dressed like that!

Getting a little angry, fortunately my blood flow stabilised. But then...

"W-w-well this is me in elementary school..."

Saying that, Moe flipped through the album and every time she turned a page our arms brushed each other sending a nervous shock through my body.

At a Sports Day rolling giant balls, singing a song at an Arts Festival, scenes from her elementary school life— Moe sparkled with nostalgia, but because I was so worried about going into Hysteria Mode, I couldn't focus on the pictures.

If it happened, come on, Kinji, if you went Hysteria Mode here... With this girl that her parents obviously love so much to take such pictures, this person who sits next to me and volunteered to help teach a bad student, this angelic Moe... I would never be able to face her ever again.

If that happened my guilty conscience would force me to pick up a gun again— in order to shoot myself in the head.

Elementary School... Elementary School...

My older brother beating combat techniques into my head, my father making me smuggle guns, remembering my pitiful childhood... surviving such things, I could definitely overcome this.

But after she was done with the album...

"..."

Moe was still quietly sitting next to me.

I had come to study, but this looks like something else. Can it be that in a normal school an invitation to 'Come over to my house and study'... has some other meaning?



Are you thinking about what you should do next to accomplish the next part

of your plan?

After what seemed to be an enormous struggle...

"T-Tohyama-kun, should we play Othello? I'm not very good at the game, and my younger sister always beats me."

She said suddenly stuttering again.

Only pretending to leave, and having crept back into the house and almost noiselessly hiding in the hall, Saki was peeking through the narrowly cracked door to the room. Turning, I could read her lips in the mirror that was in the room saying: 'Hurry up already!'

I agreed. I wanted to hurry up and get to studying.

A little later, snow began falling outside the window.

Of course, there was no thunder.

"T-Tohyama-kun, what kind of girl do you like...?"

Moe brought up something I wasn't good at talking about so I danced around it, and we moved on to talk about films since we seemed to share the same tastes... Eating sandwiches, we fell into deep conversation and talked on and on.

Eventually her younger sister who had the makings of a Butei investigator, grew disgusted and silently withdrew...

In the end it was no good as a study session, as it grew dark outside. As soon as I realised I told Moe but...

"Uh... Tohyama-kun? Would you like some dinner? Saki might have come back...but Mother and Father won't be back until t-tommorow night."

For some reason, she boldly tried to get me to stay.

No no, this won't do.

Moe angrily told Saki to leave. With the intention that she would not come back anytime soon. That would leave the two of us alone for the night... Is this an invitation to stay the night? That would be out of the question.

Before long, it will be that time of day when society frowns upon a man staying at a girl's house.

How did we get side-tracked from studying, and what does she want from me...?

I stayed until it got dark, but unfortunately I never understood it.

"N-No. It looks like the snow is stopping... I should go."

"...I would rather it didn't stop..."

Moe drooped her head and mumbled to herself. For some reason she said this loud enough for me to hear.

"Today was fun. We should..."

I broke off without saying 'we should do this again'. She probably won't help me study next time either.

"Yeah... See you later. You should come over again."

As if she blamed herself, Moe started crying for some reason. Her lips forming the words 'I'm not attractive enough'.

No, Moe, you are attractive. I don't understand why you are asking yourself that. There must be some kind of misunderstanding.

I must have given her that idea. It's because I lack common knowledge about how girls think. And because of that, I've hurt Moe.

It was an accident. But now I feel that even if she invites me again, I shouldn't come back here.

"Let me give you some cookies. I baked them this morning."

"Oh. Thank-you."

We talked as we went downstairs and she wrapped the cookies in a paper bag and gave them to me as a present—

Opening the outside door...

"Oh, wait! Let me take you to Meiji Street so that you don't get lost."

Saying that which revealed her boundless kindness, Moe pulled on her

cardigan.

And then

Squeeze

Wearing a happy face as if we had agreed to do so, Moe clutched my hand. Our fingers interlacing in the so-called 'lover's hold'⁷.

–Then.

"Kinji-san knows the way home. He doesn't need to be shown the way."

Hearing that, Moe and I were startled and turned to face the voice.

"Reki...!"

Reki was standing in front of the door.

The snow that had just fallen had melted and completely soaked her.

"He knows the way, doesn't he?"

Reki turned to me for validation. Then walking up to meet us, with her shivering cold hand... grasped both mine and Moe's wrists and began to separate our hands.

Surprisingly, Moe glaring at Reki, held on to my hand more tightly so that we would not be separated... but I let go.

I then grasped both of Reki's shoulders with my hands and, as I had suspected, she was thoroughly chilled.

"What... are you doing? You've been here the whole time?"

"Do not worry. My homeland is beset by the wasting frost⁸. I am accustomed to the cold."

"That's not the problem! We're going home!"

If we don't get you into a bath and warm you up, forget a cold, you'll have pneumonia.

Going on a little further, I noticed a passing taxi cab and ran out to flag it down...

The taxi-driver made all sorts of excuses, so I turned back toward Moe's house and heard...

"I'll give you a warning. Please do not pursue a relationship with Kinji-san."

"Yada-san, don't butt in. Everyone says that you're Tohyama-kun's girlfriend, but... I know you're not. I know what you really are...a stalker... Tohyama-kun's stalker!"

"Please do as I ask. I'm saying it for your own personal safety."

"What!? What are you saying? Could you possibly be threatening me?"

"It is not that at all. You are mistaken. You... don't have the skills required to stand by Kinji-san's side. I only came to say this: What you are doing is suicide."

"You're crazy, Yada-san!"

Reki with her bleak expression and Moe with her puffed out cheeks were arguing in front of the doorway.

What is happening to you Reki...? and you too Moe...?

Although the distance between here and home was within the single-rate⁹ I couldn't have Reki walk in this cold. Worried about her, I spread my jacket out and had Reki sit on it inside the taxi.

"Is that what she gave you?"

Reki asked in a calm, unwavering voice.

"...That's it. But I don't have any reason to think it's a wire, tap, or 'P'.¹⁰"

Because the taxi driver was there, we used a code we learned at Butei High, and I opened the paper bag and took out a cookie...

I unwrapped the pink ribbon from the bag and opened it. Upon opening it, tucked inside were chocolate chip cookies wrapped in cellophane and... and an envelope with the character design sold at Sanrio Shops.¹¹

"From Moe Mochizuki'... What's this...?"

Inside the small envelope was a letter written with some kind of pink ball-

point pen.

The characters were a bit round, but still even so they were steady and well organised.

'To Tohyama-kun: I apologise that I sent this letter so secretly.' ...?

With her ridiculously acute eyesight, I could tell that across from me, Reki was reading the letter as well...

'Since the first time I saw you, every time we meet I get the feeling that you are becoming important to me. '

Reading that cryptic opening...

Whipsh

Reki snatched away the letter.

"I am confiscating this."

"Oi Reki! You can't just snatch other people's letters! What made you so mad?"

"I am not angry."

"Yes you are!"

"..."

This is like our conversation in Kyoto.

Well, it looks like Reki is being stubborn, and the letter has nothing to do with studying.

It came in a funny envelope, so I don't think the contents are anything to worry about. If it were important she would have said it with her mouth. All we did was talk anyway.

Oh well, it can't be helped. I think I should give up on getting it back.

As soon as we got home, Reki got into the bath.

My grandfather is meeting with his old war buddies and grandmother went with him. G-Third went out to the hardware store for some unknown reason, so

the house is empty. Even Kaname is gone.

She recently joined a Shogi Club and was given the nickname 'The Prodigy of Sugamo' because of her increasing record of undefeated victories. It seem that she is becoming quite the accomplished professional player.

Because of that, I am reading a magazine in my room while sipping tea.

"I must speak with you."

Reki slid open the bathroom screen and I spit out my tea.

"Wai..!! *cough* *cough* *cough* Why are you dressed like that!?"

Coughing, I whirled and took an Ukemi¹² fall, retreating to a corner of the room

Reki was...

Only wearing one of my shirts for some reason.

No, actually not just a shirt. Because the top two buttons were unfastened, I could glimpse underneath. It looks like... she is wearing one of her usual, plain cotton sets of underwear.

Sitting seiza inside my room, the sleeves of the shirt reached down to her fingers as she slid the screen door shut.

"I concluded that coming in just underwear would be inappropriate, so I borrowed this. I don't have any normal clothes, and our bulletproof uniform might give away our cover as transfer students. My gym clothes are left at school and my pyjamas are in the laundry and have to dry."

It's a reasonable explanation... but why did you show up like that?

I have this condition Hysteria Mode that follows no kind of logic.

The shirt covered her upper half, but it only reached down to a centimetre below her crotch and her round legs were bare down to her toes.

Reki's fawn-like legs were moderately toned like Mint-chan's beautifully long legs.¹³

Unfortunately, this brain of mine is losing the power of logical reason. I'd

better leave.

As I thought that...

Ponk!

An acorn hit me between the eyebrows.

"Ouch!"

"Kinji-san, I will also warn you."

In Reki's hand was a Y-shaped slingshot. Even the Russian Spetsnatz Special Forces use them, a military grade slingshot.

So it looks like she's the one who's been pelting me with acorns recently.

Sitting seiza on her small rump next to me, from a small cloth bag...

She took her next missile and placing it into the leather pouch, Reki said...

"Please do not pursue a relationship with Moe Mochizuki."

Stretch *Whoosh!* *Ponk!*

She hit me with an acorn in the exact same spot between my eyebrows.

"Oi, cut it out! That slingshot isn't a toy! What if you hit me in the eye!?"

"I am aiming between your eyebrows. At this distance, I will not miss. It's fine. You should not mingle with Moe-san. Doing so may accidental result in her death."

Ponk!

She is hitting me in the same spot!

"'M-mingle', you say... What does that mean?"

"The Ulus have a saying: 'A wolf cannot become a dog.'"

Ponk!

"Even though you have a wolf for a Butei dog."

" And 'A dog can never become a wolf.'"

Ponk!

Before I finished speaking, I've been hit by an acorn bullet...!

"Wolves and dogs can 'cross'. They can even have offspring. But—"

'C-cross'...so that's what she was talking about? What nonsense...!¹⁴

"A wolf is always a wolf, but a dog can never go back to being a dog. If it follows a wolf away from the safety of human habitation—and migrates to the cruel forest, the dog, carrying its innate weaknesses, will exhaust its life."

Ponk!

Then, having learned the technique from my grandfather, I flipped over the tea table improvising a shield. Then, preparing for ricochets, I retreated to a corner of the room and watched the acorn sniper in the reflection of the window.

Putting down her slingshot, Reki said...

"So a wolf should only spend time with another wolf."

Step *Step*

Exposing her legs up to her crotch with each step. Reki put down her slingshot, then like she was opening a door, gripped the tea table.

Grip

Sitting down in a huff, Reki matched the height of her gaze to mine.

"..."

Just like children pretending to have a secret base— Hardening my own self-made fortress, I eventually let Reki inside the barrier.

Reki had just come from the bath and the scent of soap— unless I am mistaken, there is a faint scent of mint peculiar to Reki.

The look I saw in her amber coloured eyes is not simply one of reproof, but one of sympathy.

"Kinji-san, you ordered the old me 'not to kill people.' Because of that, I can't shut my eyes to the crime you are about to commit—that is why I oppose this relationship between you and Moe-san. To make up for it, right here, right now, if you want to use me, I don't mind. "

Saying something difficult...

"But I've noticed that you are working hard to integrate into society. And something like this is necessary for you, so..."

Sometime during that statement, Reki turned a smiling face toward me...

It's not something that a person who didn't know Reki would catch, just a slight change of expression but... that was a gentle smiling face. Then lowering her cute voice.

"—Hurray, Hurray, for Kinji-san."

Saying that, Reki poked her fingertips slightly out of the long sleeves of the shirt in her tiny grip, and waved both of them slightly back and forth.

She is most likely thinking 'Is this how you cheer someone on?' and Reki, in her own way, has put a lot of thought into it...

That's right... Reki, you are supporting me. Even someone as dumb as me, in that moment, finally grasped the meaning of Reki's actions.



Reki... she is only keeping the old promise she made to me, and I shouldn't be

surprised.

Even though the rest of Baskerville laughed at my wish to 'become a normal person'– Reki decided to respect my choice.

No matter how isolated I become, no matter what I decide to do, Reki will follow me. Not because someone else wants her to, but because she wants to.

I still don't understand this whole fuss over Moe... But I understand that Reki is selflessly devoted to me.

All this time, I've had a good friend. I am sure of it.

I was so struck by her honest heart, that I wanted to hug her right there, but... considering the part of her body that is forming the vertical part of the Y shape, please forgive me. I can't.

1. Kouhai = juniors. Students younger or less experienced. Opposite of 'Senpai', but never used a form of address.

2. In Shogi, pieces move similarly to Chess pieces, so I used that terminology. 'Forking' is a strategy where a piece is moved such that in the next turn it can take two different pieces. Since the opponent only has one move, they must choose which they want to lose.

3. Formal sitting posture where you kneel on your knees and sit on the ankles

4. In a skirt, it's obvious what this means, but what's more, it's bad etiquette for women to spread their knees while sitting seiza.

5. Popular story to scare children. Raijin, thunder beasts, will steal kids belly buttons if they aren't covered during thunderstorms.

6. This is a reference to a short cartoon series that depicted the misadventures of an unarmoured tank who lacked any kind of will to fight.

7. Apparently it's considered romantic or a sign of romance for couples to interlock fingers. Lots of sappy emotionalism attached to it..

8. Reki is from Mongolia. There is a Mongolian word 'dzud' that describes the

sudden onset of extended periods of frost that kills plants and drastically reduces forage-able land.

9. In Japan the initial fare covers the first 2km (the exact figure varies by region) of the trip, afterwards you have to pay additional charges depending on the distance. Long story short, it's not far.

10. Kanji say 'wire tap', 'bug', and 'poison'.

11. The shop chain that owns the rights to Hello Kitty.

12. Ukemi (recieving) is Aikido training that teaches the practitioner how to absorb and minimise harm from a fall or throw. It can be a roll or break-fall.

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6CzIASFIRg>

13. Reference to Tokyo Mew Mew Character of the same name

14. The joke here is that the word for 'mingle' can mean 'be friendly' or, ya know, have sex... O.O

Chapter 4: Kikuyo Kagataka

Grandfather, Grandmother, me, G-3, Kaname, and lastly the free-loader Reki—

When we all eat dinner together, it's pretty lively. Although the faces have changed a lot, it's like the days when my parents and older brother filled out the number.

The men sat cross-legged and the women sat in seiza around the low table, in the tatami floored living room. Sitting while holding her knees like in gym class was Reki's default, but Grandmother had taught her to sit in seiza.

"Now Kaname! You must learn to eat fish more neatly, it's an insult to the fisherman! Don't spill your rice! There are 88 gods in each grain!"¹

Grandfather was giving a lecture on Japanese manners, but he was having fun doing it. He likes it when things are lively.

Almost every recipe in my Grandmother's repertoire is ethnic Japanese. Tonight it's Pacific saury grilled with salt, root vegetable broth, followed by cooked rice, and miso soup with clam.

What was on the table was extremely common fare, the typical scene of a Japanese dinner, but...

"So Aniki, you've stopped being a Butei!? Now you can kill in self-defence! That's great!"

Saying that, G-3 loudly chomped down on his clams. While still awkward with her chopsticks, Kaname noisily munched her fish. These two American born Genions.

By the way G-3, this irresponsible habit of changing your hairstyle everyday is something you should stop. You'll go bald.

Your daily choice of clothes is also strange, are you Lady Gaga or something?

Having had to forsake her unbalanced diet of Calorie Mate bars ever since coming to my house, seated beside me was Reki who was able to intimidate

even S-Rank Butei — A sniper able to hit a pocket-size book at a range of 2 kilometres.

Oh, and outside, taking care of the food scraps and recently growing a little plump, was Haimaki, former underling of Vlad, the Count Dracula.

All of those here some kind of unique prodigies. Every one.

"Seconds."

Completely ignoring G-3's recent remark, I held out my now empty rice bowl. Since it would be wrong to make my Grandmother do all of the work, my family has this rule that the person sitting nearest to the container of rice is in charge of serving it.

So while G-3 grumbled 'Am I your mother?', he served the rice.

And over by my grandfather...

Bzzzz

Attracted by the smell of fish, one of the last flies of the season flew in.

Well, we are on the first floor, so there's no helping it.—

As I was thinking that.—

Catch

A-amazing! My grandfather caught the fly.

With his chopsticks.

Just like Miyamoto Musashi!²

My grandfather is matching the speed of his chopsticks to the flying fly and the holding them lightly between the chopsticks. That is how he is catching flies on the fly.

"Even an insect has a soul."

Saying that, my grandfather, having not killed the fly, released it outside... then went to wash his chopsticks in the kitchen... G-3 and Kaname were astonished.

The only one not surprised was Reki, munching her own food—

"Kinzou, would you like more grated daikon?"

My grandmother asked smiling with drooping eyelids.

Huh...? Kinzou...? Who's that?

"...Yeah."

G-3 answered, turning a little red.

With a look of "?" on my face, Kaname said:

"Since Grandmother kept calling him Chi-Sando and other things by mistake, she gave him a Japanese name, okay?"

While giving that explanation, Kaname grinned at G-3.

Kinzou, G-3: Golden Cross the Third.

Isn't that just a literal translation?³

But it seems that the name doesn't suit the person himself, so knowing that, he glared at me and Reki.

"Aniki, you too Reki. Don't you call me that. G-3 is fine."

"Got it, Kinzou."

"Understood, Kinzou-san"

"Kinzou!"

That last bit was Kaname.

"You guys...!"

Saying that, G-3 was about to snap, but...

He saw Grandfather had returned to the living room, and he quieted down.

Does this guy have respect for the elderly, or something?

After dinner, in order to brush up on conversation topics I could talk about with my classmates, I watched all kinds of TV shows and dramas. But watching TV with a set purpose became boring rather quickly, so I stopped partway through.

If it were Riko, she could probably do it...

Thinking that, when I thought that I had to go to school tomorrow, it made me depressed.

Ever since I was invited to her house, my lifeline Moe for some reason would say: 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Just forget about that letter.' and look like she was about to cry. And every time I try to get closer to her, Reki would pelt me with acorns.

Why do I even go to that school? I don't understand any of the lessons, so there's no point.

I've already skipped school and shut myself up in my room, but... Lately, I haven't been sleeping well.

Maybe my nerves are overactive because of the lack of daily fights, leading to some kind of insomnia.

I wonder if it's some kind of-breakdown?

I feel like my mind, while relaxed, is slowly rotting away.

Why...? Even with this peace... With this daily peace, I shouldn't have anything to complain about...

In the middle of this peace, my mind has reached a critical point.

I wonder if all those people who quit being a Butei have had the same thoughts?

Thinking about that, Headmaster Midorimatsu said something like that, didn't he?

'Students from Butei High are poor in their studies, lacking in social education, and have high drop-out rates.'

So it seems like I all but, fit that typical case.

No! No! No! Stop it Kinji!

Standing up, I put on my haori⁴ and went out onto the veranda to clear my head in the night air.

I need to hang in there. To become a normal person like Moe. What do I have

to do?

Speaking of her... Moe...

I thought about her.

She said she was attending a cram school. There should be classes for under-achieving students like me.

I'm a little unsure about my future finances, but if I sell off all my equipment from my time at Butei High, that should be enough. It should even be enough to pay for a major gap-school.⁵

If studying became fun, maybe school would become a little more enjoyable as well. School is a place to learn, after all.

Pondering that new idea—

"...?"

In a corner of my family's quite large garden, a light shone... What is G-3 doing? He is steadily digging up the ground with a US Army issue shovel.

Perhaps because he had been at it for a while and become hot, he wasn't wearing anything except a mountain camouflage shirt on his brawny torso, even though he is usually flashy with his clothes.

Putting on a pair of slip-on shoes, I approached the suspiciously acting G-3 and called to him.

"Oi! Kinzou, you can't just go digging holes in people's gardens."

"I'll kill you! Rather, if it's your family's garden, it's my family's garden too!"

"Who are you, Giant?⁶"

Examining the materials G-3 had stacked there—

He had all of the supplies to construct a greenhouse. And tomato seeds...?

"What are you doing?"

"Are you so thick that you can't tell by looking, Aniki? After preparing and improving the soil, I'm going to raise vegetables. I've mobilised all of my subordinates and accelerated the growth cycle by selective breeding, but it's a

local product. A product of Kumamoto, a 'Gondou Farms Salted Tomato'. See for yourself."

Saying that, he handed me something... it was a small tomato.

It was a beautiful specimen and nibbling it, even though it had 'salt' in the name, it was sweet. It was good.

"We only just discovered this. This species of tomato synthesises natural fructose and Lycopene organic compounds that, undergoing an unexpected side-reaction, produce another chemical compound— It neutralises my 'Life Limiter'. So I want to plant them in fields all over the world, so that I can eat them for the rest of my life."

Speaking of that... G-3's creators at Los Alamos had introduced a congenital defect into his body in order to prevent rebellion. That inhuman method required G-3 to ingest some kind of secret compound at regular intervals or it would adversely affect his vital functions. He has identified that chemical.

That's wonderful, isn't it?

"And so you became a farmer, huh? You have it rough too."

"If you are going to pity me, at least give me a hand. Well... water, salt, vitamins, are all things that humans need to keep living, humans need a lot of things. In my case, I only need one more. "

Working briskly, G-3 finished constructing the greenhouse and began skillfully planting the seeds... I don't need to say it... but it was as to be expected of a Genion.

"From the results of selective breeding, a strain of potato can also be cultivated. Gramps will be taking care of that."

Saying that, he once again confirmed his attachment to Grandfather.

"By the way, you are always so calm in front of Grandfather. I thought you were the egocentric type."

Saying that while eating a tomato, I ventured a probe.

"He is a living legend. It's my way of showing proper respect to a 'Die hard'"

"'Die Hard'? The film?"

"Aniki, please... you should learn more English. 'Die hard', it means someone who is hard to kill. It will be on a test."

"I'm sure it won't."

"Do you at least know that Japan was at war with the US a long time ago?"

"Of course I know that!"

"'Die hard' was a special designation used by the US Army after World War II to classify those 'Un-killable Soldiers' of former enemy nations that would require special measures to deal with in case war broke out again— To be more precise, those soldiers whom it would cost an enormous amount of personnel and expenses to kill. The US have not been negligent in life-long surveillance of these people. 3 of them are living in Japan, 2 in Germany, 2 in Russia, and 1 in Iraq. So Aniki... even though you are his grandchild, you seriously don't know the heroic exploits of Magane Tohyama?"

Asking that, G-3 looked disappointed.

"Grandfather never liked talking about the war."

"You don't show him enough respect. I'll tell you."

Finishing the first phase of his farm-work, G-3...

Started telling my Grandfather's story.

Grandfather was an ensign in the old Imperial Japanese Navy. A Zero fighter pilot.

While near the Aleutian Archipelago in the North Pacific, he encountered heavy anti-aircraft fire from US forces and was unable to return to his ship, so he crashed in the frozen waters...

After that, he somehow managed to swim and cross back into what once was Japanese territory—a small, snow-covered island, Blesk Island⁷— Unluckily, two days later, US forces landed 300 troops on the island, but he was able—single-handedly—to hold them back.

Thanks to his efforts, 100 military and civilian personnel on the island were

able to be evacuated safely. But because of the number of serious wounds he suffered in that battle, it was not until after the war that he was able to stand on his own feet once more.

'Because of injuries sustained in the crash, he was hospitalised until the end of the war' 'He had lost sight of his comrades in a fog'...

Those were the vague things that I had heard from him, and how I wished those stories were actually true...!

What are you doing, Grandfather...! Of course something like that would have an effect on the US!

The one in my family that is the most abnormal is Grandfather.

And now, he is in his room, lazing around on his bed and farting while reading horse racing magazines.

I'll never be free from my extraordinarily gifted family if I don't become a responsible adult.

First of all, I have to be able to keep up in school. Following my thoughts from the other day, I went to check out a gap-school on Meiji Dori Street called 'Kawai Cram School'.

It's impressive that a cram school takes up the entire 9-storey building! This is an unknown world for me.

"I mean, why did you come with me!"

"I am just walking the same way as you."

Being as uncommunicative as ever, Reki stayed by my side and we entered the top floor conference room together to get the necessary information, but... although I can't say anything about other people, it was very surreal. To see a genius sniper at a cram school.

Now then, which courses should I take...?

I looked through the pamphlet they had given me, and as we went back to get on the elevator...

"?"

W-what's this?

It seems that students on this floor had finished their classes, and they got into the elevator with us.

As they crowded in, I looked up from the pamphlet and saw a girl.

And another girl.

They were all girls.

They were also wearing East Ikebukuro High School uniforms, and what more, they were all in the same year as us!

What is with these people! Why are they all trying to get onto the same elevator with Reki and me?

"We are the 'Transfer Student Couple's Support Club'!"

"Now then, we're getting tired of watching the two of you! When are the two of you going to get closer?"

"Come on! Get closer already!"

As the girls said those things us, they created a very strange situation....

As for this 'Support Club'—this group has the same poor-sounding naming sense as Riko.

"H-hey! Reki and I—"

I started to explain, but...

"No way! I knew he calls her by her first name~!"

"And Yada-san calls Tohyama-kun, 'Kinji-san', doesn't she~!"

By talking, I only managed to excite them even more.

W-what is this...?

In a normal school, is it wrong for guys and girls to call each other by their first names? The group only became more disorganised and pushy, and all the girls started shoving.

First they all crowded around Reki, and then started pushing us together.

Because we were in a small elevator, they was nowhere to run... I was unable to resist the girls... and now facing each other, Reki and I were forced up against each other.

"Now! Tohyama-kun and Yada-san, show a little courage! "

Saying that, the girls grabbed my right and left arms– making it look like I was hugging Reki.

W-what do you want me to do...!

Classes were over and the floor was empty, and they had someone keeping the elevator open by repeatedly pressing the 'Open Door' button.

These girls, they saw us coming into the cram school and worked out this plan.

"...Ugh..."

Like a game of Oshikura Manju⁸, they kept pushing on R-Reki's back–but pulled on my arms so that it looked like I was holding her in a tight embrace.

"..."

Then, they took the expressionless Reki's hands and placed them around my back.

Now it really looks like we are embracing each other! Me and Yada-san.

But Reki's chest, more than Aria's but less than Watson's, in terms of safety... that is... R-Reki... h-have they gotten bigger!?

As I noticed this...

Ka-thump

It happened. The throb of Hysteria Mode. It even happened under these strange conditions...!

"Chuu!"

"Chu~u!"

"Chuu!!!"

"Chuu! Chuu!"

"Chuu!"

What are you... a swarm of mice...!?⁹

Reki and I had been surrounded by girl mice.

If I don't do something about these pushy pack of squeakers, we won't be able to go home.

Also— If they keep pushing Reki's chest up against me, things will get dangerous. For Reki and for them.

If I go into Hysteria Mode, I will probably start moving supersonically. Hurting everyone.

"R-Reki, look up and pull your chest in...!"

Thinking that I was 'getting ready to kiss her', the girls squealed.

But that was not what I had in mind. It was a stop-gap body re-positioning measure meant to relax the crushing pressure that had us glued chest to chest.

That was my formulated plan, but for some reason when I communicated it Reki...

She did not look up at me.

She buried her head against my chest and remained there fixedly.

"What are you doing, Reki? Do what I said!"

The girl mice got excited all over when I instructed Reki again—

Reki turned her head slightly to the side...

...peeking out.

Looking at me with upturned eyes.

Apparently she is under the impression I am going to kiss her in front of all these people, and her face...

...is embarrassed.

I've also noticed a slight change in Reki's expression.

I've noticed faint hints of emotion have been sprouting inside of Reki ever since the school trip... this is embarrassment.

Reki, embarrassed is...

C-cute.

Combined with her usual lack of expression, it's destructive power...

Ka-thump

Sigh...

I-made a wry smile.

Reki, Reki. Really... she is a cute girl too, isn't she?

But I already knew that, didn't I? You really are sweet. I knew it from the time we met.

Not recognising a girl's secret love is a sin. A sin against the entire world.

As a reward for triggering my Hysteria mode by showing me that embarrassed face—

Reki, I want to kiss you passionately hundreds of times until you lose all feeling, but...

"...I understand all of you girls' feelings."

I said, sensing the flow of energy throughout the group of girls that surrounded us—

Raising my index fingers and excusing myself, I stroked the girls' sleeves using only my fingertips.

Their bodies tensed, and they all stood straighter as if they had snapped to attention.

"W-what?"

"?"

"W-what's this..."

"Huh...?"

The girls started looking around at each other...

With Hysteria Mode, it is possible to lead some to move as you wish and maintain total control just like in Aikido.

It is possible to make them assume almost any position. Using their own power.

"The feelings of all women alike should be respected. Who here—shares Reki's feelings? If there anyone like that, would you please raise your hand?"

Gathering Reki in my right arm, I shot a sharp look at each of the girls as I gave a smile—

Poof *Poof* *P-P-Poof* *Po~of*

They all turned bright red. Standing stiff in shock with their mouths hanging open.

Hmph... It seems that these little mischievous mice have calmed down.

One girl had started to raise her hand, but I turned and stopped her with a kind smile.

You're Ichi-san, if I'm not mistaken. You shouldn't sell yourself so cheaply.

Then...

Drawing Reki's head closer with my right hand, I brought my lips close to her ear.

Because my brain in Hysteria Mode has altogether too much redundant memory and perceptivity...

I realised that these girls were **not the only ones following us.**

"—There is an enemy not far off, and you cannot fight a close-quarters battle. We will retreat separately and go home."

I said.

"....."

Having come to the same conclusion that I did, Reki moved her hands nervously, grabbing my blazer.

"... Do you think your lord is so weak? Or, Reki, are you the kind to deny me the pleasure of the night? Ah, if that is it, I am somewhat anxious for our future together."

Closing my eyes, I whispered these words closely into Reki's ear.

"....."

At the words 'our future together', Reki gave a small response—showing that she held a feeling of expectation.

Whish *Whish*

She shook her head from side to side. Alright, she seems to have given permission.

"Rest, Reki. I am glad you came with me."

Releasing her from my arm, I exited the elevator alone.

As the door closed, the one in charge of keeping the door open, lifted her hand slightly from the button—

As the door closed, I winked them a goodbye.

Judging from the sound, It seems that several of the girls fainted inside the elevator. Some of them even had nosebleeds.

It seems that my gaze was much too stimulating for those innocent girls.

Then—the first half of the Ulus proverb that Reki had shared popped into my head—

'A wolf cannot become a dog.'

Echoing in my mind. Like a bad omen.

Putting plenty of space behind me, I took the stairs to the first floor—

Going out the front door of the building onto the night scene of Meiji Street, I began walking along the sidewalk.

And beside the guard railing—

"Tohyama—! Cough up the dough—!"

"Ya better not have forgotten!"

Sure enough, it was Fujikibayashi and Asao riding that modded motorbike and waiting to ambush me.

Fujikibayashi wore cheap brass knuckles on his fingers, and Asao carried a metal bat.

In the surrounding area, there were many students going home after cram school. The troublesome thing is that there are East Ikebukuro High students among them.

There are too many spectators, but... whatever, they make no difference.

Although I'm in Hysteria Mode this time, what I need to do is the same.

The scene is 'The two strong delinquents abusing me with violence' Act No. 2.

I need to buy a little time so Reki won't be dragged into this.

"This is dangerous! It looks like there is going to be a fight."

The girls said as they began clearing the area...

"Like to butt in on other people's business, do ya!?"

Fujikibayashi said as he grabbed me by the shoulders.

While I pretended to let him show off his strength... I took a knee from Asao and doubled over.

Because his angle was off, it felt like he had only brushed by me, but I made it look like it hurt.

After that, my mischievous side came out-

Carefully guided their attacks, I made Asao hit Fujikibayashi and Fujikibayashi hit Asao.

Of course, they attacked without using their weapons.

Teary-eyed from the friendly fire, the two of them couldn't go more than 3 minutes without losing their breath...

That's... a little dangerous.

Something by the side of the road had caught my attention.

An illegally blacked-out Toyota Century with even the passenger and driver's side windows tinted a smoky colour so that you couldn't see inside.

That kind of car... I know who it is.

A **yakuza** car.

From the beginning, the car had been parked on the side of the road a little ways away watching this charade, and I noticed... they were moving closer.

...Stopping near us, the rear window of the Century opened slightly.

"That's enough, you two."

Not even having imagined that a yakuza would come up behind them, Fujikibayashi and Asao— turned white as a sheet.

"That gentleman is different."

It seems that female voice was talking about me... and I paled slightly myself.

It was only because I was in Hysteria Mode that I could hear what was said.

It was mature and slightly husky... That voice was... dangerous... Very dangerous. But a voice, different from the first said:

"Lemme take care of it!"

The passenger window rolled down, an arm stuck out, and a well-built man emerged.

He wore leather rock star trousers. Close cropped gold hair. And earrings in his ears.

Even though it was winter, he wore a black tank top, probably to show off the tattoos that covered his arms.

I've seen this man before... in a magazine article.

The International Boxing Federation's former Pan-Pacific light-heavyweight champion, Leon Izawa.

Half South American Columbian—dark-skinned and muscled— he is decidedly un-Japanese in appearance.

I heard that he was once the leader of a biker-gang¹⁰ in Kanto, but after

leaving boxing he became a yakuza henchman.

Things had very obviously become dangerous...

The cram-school students that had lined up and surrounded us to watch the fight began whispered nervously.

"–Don't worry. It seems that they are after me."

I said to the thoroughly frightened Fujikibayashi and Asao so that wouldn't panic, as I turned around with a beaming smile...

"Oi! What are you lookin' at!."

Leon cracked his knuckles as he approached, grabbed me by the neck, and held me up to his face.

Then he squinted his intimidatingly, and peered at my face–

"Ah~! The brat is strong."

If you know that, then stop chattering. If I were to lift my arm just a little bit right now, you would bite your tongue and be in very bad spot.

But... That ability to accurately see through and gauge his opponent's fighting strength isn't fake.

He is halfway between a professional and amateur– he's a semi-professional.

"I think you had better stop."

I warned him, but–

"Don't worry 'bout me, I'm strong too!"

Wham!

Leon threw a heavy body blow.

Since we were so close, it's power was only about half, but this is what a real punch should be like.

He let go of my neck... it was useless to pretend to stagger, so I reacted normally and put some room between us.

If he were on Fujikibayashi and Asao's level, I could have fooled him...

But I can't fool this guy. It looks like I can't help it.

So that the rubbernecking students aren't caught up in this, I can't just run away.

...Dammit! And I had tried so hard to become a normal person...

Inside, my simmering anger boiled over.

In front of everyone... you are making me show my true colours. But now I'm desperate.

I'll think about the excuse later. A hidden camera show, or something.

Gathering my resolve, I calmed myself, as if I were becoming a different person.

"Hey you!"

Yelled Leon, skillfully transferring his weight and closing the gap between us.

Pa!

Sending out a jab, but it was no good. He was a boxer.

Things like kicks, grappling, submissions, throws, and how to use things around you and the ground in fight are things you don't know.

If you are going to fight hand-to-hand, these are things you should know, like how to head-butt and bite. You are ignorant of the body's vital points.

After all, your style is a sport. So, I'm sorry, but I don't plan on standing around and jabbing at each other.

Pa! *Pa!*

Leon threw a solid left hook and a right body blow, but—

"Leon, on your left! The police are coming!"

I shouted while Leon was carrying out his punches, and surprised, he jerked his head left.

Having anticipated that movement, before he could move back...

Pa!

I struck his jaw with the heel of my hand.

"-Ugh..."

Stunned by the blow, Leon staggered as he stood to his feet and retreated sluggishly.

Of course the police aren't coming. It was a bluff.

He had been tricked by something so simple. But Leon was still fired up, so...

"This is how you use a sign post!"

Running lightly and jumping, I jumped at a the pole of a 'No Parking' sign and folded my body in-

-*Boom!*

Like some kind of wall-jump, expanding my arms, legs, and back at the same time, I drove both my feet into Leon's face. Doing that, I deliver more force than any boxer could pack into a punch.

Saying 'Wow!' the students watching sent up a cheer.

"Aghhh!"

Upsetting a rubbish bin by the roadside in grand style, Leon fell backwards...
Thump!...!

Striking the back of his head on the asphalt.

Hey now! Don't you even know ukemi!?[11](#)

"Ooogh...!"

With a nauseous face, Leon writhed in pain. From his perspective, the world must be spinning.

As a boxer, he would never have received a blow to the back of the head. The rules don't allow it and protect him.

But in actual hand-to-hand combat, you go for the most vital points first.

"...Ughhhh..."

Leaning on the guard rail, Leon was able to raise his upper body.

But it looked like he was unable to stand, and he remained seated. Glaring at me resentfully. Dangerously.

With me looking down at Leon—

It was obvious that victory had been decided, and seeing that, the students raised a loud cheer.

"Shit...!"

Realising that his boxing skills weren't getting him anywhere, he reached behind his back—

In the back of his leather trousers, from which he drew a gun he had hidden there.

"...You really should stop."

I had already noticed it and gave Leon a scowl.

Bringing a weapon into the fight makes it interesting, but I think it makes things dangerous for my opponent.

"S-Scared are ya?"

Misinterpreting my statement, Leon sneered with a grin... and I grabbed the grip of the pistol.

"No. It's been hard for me to hold back."

And in response to my words—

Leon furrowed his eyebrows.

There was at least the possibility that he knew what I had said was not a lie. But because a yakuza cannot show his back, he pushed on regardless.

"—Die!!!"

Not giving up, he pulled out an automatic pistol—a Makarov PM, and pointed it at me.

Shrieks immediately sounded from the surroundings.

The students screamed "It's a gun!" and fled like a bunch of baby spiders.

And as I saw Leon's arm muscles tensing to take action, I had already begun to

move—

Leon was left-handed, and as soon as he drew his gun, I move to his left side and grabbed the back of his gun in my right hand while jamming my finger in between the cocking hammer— now he won't be able to shoot.

Next, I restrained Leon's left superficial flexor muscle, rendering him unable to grasp a gun. At the same time, I released the magazine and pulled the slide back, ejecting the bullet from the chamber so now the cocking hammer would strike only empty air...

...There you go!

If we couldn't do that in under 5 seconds, Ranbyou would beat us to a pulp.

How many hundreds of times did I do it in ASSAULT, and I got caught up in the moment and 'cleaned up'... In front of everyone.

—Watching me do that, Leon clicked his tongue.

"You... you're a professional."

"Ehhh? What do you mean?"

Having a spare magazine, as he loaded it into his gun, I... Felt a strangely exhilarating feeling.

As if what had been bothering me every day until now was a lie.

This fight was child's-play for me, but was it because I held a gun again?

"You did tell me that I should give up."

Leon ran his fingers lightly through his closely cropped hair—

I had been glancing back into a corner of my field of vision ever since this bad situation started, and I sighed.

—Moe was there. In the crowd of students watching.

Moe is on the inside of the glass front of the Kawai Cram School, and standing there...

Looking at me with an expression of "What did I just see happen?".

Moe did say that she went to a cram school... and it looks like it's this one.

This just isn't my day.

Seeing me stop and look at her like that, it is obvious that we have some kind of relation.

The yakuza are good at spotting things like that. What might happen if they figure out that you are connected to me.

But... I can't just tell her to get out of here. Then they'd be sure to find out.

"You there-! Hey-! What are you doing-!"

Although I was bluffing a while ago, now there were police running toward us.

I thought the people at the cram school were ignoring the incident, but it seems that someone had reported it.

But because there was a lot of foot traffic in the area, the officers were having a hard time pushing their way through the crowd.

Then from the backseat of the Century...

"I must thank you for giving that show-boating idiot his medicine."

Wearing a modern cut kimono meant for casual wear, with flowers arranged in her long, glossy dyed brown hair, a female yakuza stepped out.

Although there's something slightly off in the look of her eyes, she is a beautiful woman, no, a beautiful girl.

Even though she has a mature look, she can't be more than 16.

"...I'm not a doctor."

I know this beauty. I recognised when I heard her voice— Kikuyo Kagataka: Daughter of the organised Kagataka Family syndicate.

"Tohyama. Let's go on a date. The 'you' right now can't refuse, am I right?"

Saying that, she obviously knows me too. The two of us have met before. Although it's an impossible fate.

"..."

It looks like she won't simply allow me to leave. And in Hysteria Mode, it's hard to ignore womanly wiles.

"Alright. Let's go. If you were to make too much 'noise' though, Kikuyo, it would cost a lot to keep your shady business hidden, you know."

Grumbling slightly as the driver of the Century pointed an Uzi at me from the slightly cracked door, I... got in the back seat with Kikuyo.

"K-Kikuyo-san, me too..."

Still holding his aching head, Leon tried to get in as well, but Kikuyo...

"Deal with it. You're a man aren't you? The cops are coming. Better start moving."

Leaving him with those words, Kikuyo slammed the car door shut.

It sees that Kikuyo is good at eluding the police. She doesn't seem worried about being caught.

"If you wanted to invite me on a date, don't you think you could have avoided all this elaborate fuss?"

"I thought that if I made it look like a kidnapping, it would make things easier for you, Tohyama."

Taking advantage of the fact that the car was rounding a corner, Kikuyo used the side mirror– to look back. At Moe.

I knew she'd figure it out.

Moe had gotten the cram school students to shelter back inside the building....

But after I had gotten into the car, she came back out onto the sidewalk and started looking around.

It was obvious. She was looking for me.

"Is she yours?"

Kikuyo asked, annoyed, raising her pinky finger.

"I don't know her."

"Tohyama, whenever you are protecting a girl, you always use the same line."

In response to my words, Kikuyo adopted a tired look and slouched back.

If I remember, this scent is Hypnotic Poison¹²— I really don't like perfumes, but... this one I don't mind.

And Kikuyo knows this.

Outside the window, crosswalks, vending machines, and signs and billboards for the local nightlife meant to entice the passerby streamed past.

As the car moved down the street, the local pimps bowed their heads in acknowledgement, I noticed.

This is getting complicated...

Leaning against my shoulder and humming...

"To the office, Fifth Family Head?"

The largely built chauffeur with the scar in his face asked Kikuyo.

"No, to 'The Ruby'. All the executives will meet us there."

Just like I remember, she turned her head slightly to the side while giving this order.

That sulky gesture was unexpectedly cute, and it only strengthened my Hysteria Mode.

"Nice car."

I said as I pulled myself away from Kikuyo's body, pretending to look around at the inside of the car.

In reality, the Century really is a luxury car. I noticed that when I got in.

"Want it?"

"..... I'll pass. But I think I misjudged you, I thought you liked Mercedes?"

"I do have one, but only for fun. It would be a problem if a foreign car broke down at the wrong moment. Even the American Mafia prefer Japanese cars. But if you want it, Tohyama, you can have it— even the Benz."

Kikuyo... Whenever I admire something she has, she always asks: 'Want it?' without fail.

"–But Kikuyo, how did you find me?"

I said evasively as the nightlife of Shinobazu street rolled past the windows, smiling as I changed the subject.

"Fu fu! You shouldn't underestimate the yakuza intelligence network. Some low-ranking members know Fujikibayashi and Asao. They were bragging about their fight, and so it eventually reached my ears."

Kikuyo explained the trick behind how she found me, and the chauffeur rummaged in his pocket for a mobile and then turned to look at me in the rear-view mirror.

"Sir, what should we do with Leon? We've caught him, but... To get to the point, do you think a finger or...?"

"O-Oi! Let him go. Where I come... came from, those kind of fights happen every 5 minutes."

"Yes, sir. Understood."

These people are dangerous.

Knowing things before the police, and moving faster. Thinking about how I had saved Leon here, I shook my head...

"I knew about your father's 'job', but it looks like you've inherited it."

"My predecessor was killed. Internal dispute. Now I'm the boss."

Kikuyo–

When I went to Kanagawa Middle School– an affiliate of Butei High– she had figured out Hysteria Mode, and at every possible turn, used me as her personal 'ally of justice'.

She had plans to join LEZZAD with her connexions to the criminal underworld, but in the middle of training she dropped out.

She said that she had to transfer so quickly for family reasons–in the end, it seems it really was something like that.

"Fu fu! I'm so happy. My hero will eat dinner with me tonight."

Saying that, the look in Kikuyo's narrowed eyes suggested a maturity beyond

her actual age...

The inside of the car had been softly well-lit, but we now stopped in front of a restaurant with a flashy signboard.

The 'Ruby' was very selective and only served members and their guests.

Or so it would seem... the restaurant has a basement that gives off a mysterious vibe that reaches the upper floors, and everything is owned by Kikuyo.

Only authorised people can enter– it's what you might call a **yakuza building**.

"..."

Like its name, the interior was richly decked with red colour and gold undertones– and, of course, you could only get in with a reservation.

The waitresses wore Chinese dresses with skirts so short that you could almost see their underwear, while the hostesses wore long multi-coloured strapless dresses and greeted the guests with a smile...

Without exception, there were all beauties.

What is this place, the Palace of the Dragon King?¹³

But the only water here was a goldfish tank with a dangerous notice that said:

'There is no poison in the food. But if you are mistrustful, you may put the food in the tank and see for yourself.'

As expected, it is *that* kind of place.

Walking inside, my eyebrow rose slightly...

"This kind of place doesn't suit you? Want some sushi?"

Her long kimono fluttering like a goldfish's fins, the princess of this palace asked as she walked like a model down a runway.

"No, the smell of old and new gunpowder relaxes me, but...I think there are a few too many girls."

"Oi! All of you can leave."

I only grumbled a few words, but Kikuyo ordered all of those beauties out at once.

Reaching the back of the room, we entered a large, expensively decorated private room—

Inside, there was a huge table that dominated the room, covered with more food than you could eat and expensive bottles of sake arranged neatly in rows.

Just like the offer of the car we had ridden in, this show of generosity is the yakuza way of showing honour and welcome. Refusing it would be like rejecting them.

Well, compared to the Benz this is a mere trifle...

Thinking that, I noticed everyone looking at me like I was a long-awaited guest— They all wore matching gold badges marking them all out as the executives of the Kagataka Family and they were all seated at the table.

Hey! This is scary. It's about 3 times scarier than going to MASTERS at Butei High.

"..."

Sitting down, I looked around. Once I did so, everyone looked back at me.

Then, in unison, they all gave an 'Ah, yes.' as a token of acceptance.

Don't be so quick to accept me.

Is this because a yakuza can know a person by just looking at them?

In Butei terms this was we call 'the ability to compare strength between yourself and others'— in short, the ability to determine whether an opponent is stronger or weaker than you, quickly and accurately.

They would be also be doing the same. The yakuza feed upon the weak, if only they did not have that habit of currying favour with the strong...

The reason I am not arrogant of this fact is that, worst case scenario, they may decide to kill me. For real.

It is for that reason that Butei infiltration and investigations of the families are so difficult. Such things are usually left to a specialist.

"...See? I told you he was good, didn't I?"

Sitting next to me, the fifth family head, Kikuyo, said smiling at the room.

"Yes. This guest has a fine look. He looks like someone who has crossed over the point of life and death several times."

Kikuyo's bodyguard and erstwhile chauffeur said the same thing as my grandfather.

"Ha! This boy looks more frightening than a yakuza."

A handsome man in a pinstripe suit that looked like a club host said with a laugh as he folded his hands behind his head.

The way he jested lightly, would have attracted any girl and make her light-headed.

"Yes, he might have a face like a potato, but he is strong."

Said the man with the shaved head that Kikuyo had introduced as an ex-wrestler. I could just make out a tattoo on his neck.

"So that is how it is. That there is such a child, proves the world is a large place."

Said the tall man who seemed to be the brain of the family operation, and who looked like a first-class trade company businessman. A Tokyo Law School graduate.

They are all looking at me with interest— but it seems they understand.

They had learned from Leon's mistake... They knew that if it came to it, I could defeat them all in under a minute.

Well, it would be better if things went on without a problem. If I were to try my strength again, the number of victims would only increase.

"Tohyama, something to drink?"

Kikuyo said as she grabbed a bottle of brandy from the table.

"I don't drink sake. I'm underage."

"Hmph."

Taking out a pipe and placing it between her lips, Kikuyo held the red pipe in her mouth between her red painted lips—

Immediately, the executive who looked like a host sitting next to her lit it.

"... I don't get many chances to use it. It's a DuPont lighter."

Giving Kikuyo a wry smile,

"You know, you shouldn't smoke."

And immediately, Kikuyo passed the pipe to the host sitting next to her— and picking up a cup of water on the table *Splash!*

Put out the cigarillo that the Tokyo Law Graduate was already smoking.

"Alright, he doesn't like the smoke."

Getting mad at someone for something you do yourself. This reminds me of Aria trying to shift the blame to someone else.

What had just happened made me very uncomfortable, but putting that aside—

"—That's not all that I don't like."

I glanced around at the group, and then looked at Kikuyo.

Realising that I didn't like the group of executives, Kikuyo said:

"All of you can leave."

Perhaps because tonight was only meant as a formal introduction, the executives all rose from their seats.

But the fact they left without a complaint... surprised me.

"... Tohyama, how do I look? Since middle-school... haven't I become a beauty?"

When the two of us were alone, Kikuyo...

Up until now she had acted in a mature manner, but now she became quite shy.

"–I can't deny the truth."

I answered as she hid her face as the current me thought: "I can't get enough of this!"

And with an expressive look,

"My mom was an actress, you know. Canadian. They tell me that I look more and more like her."

"It must be true. That's why your hair is such a light colour, although I never heard anyone in middle-school mention it."

"That's because I never talked to any else about my parents."

Kikuyo turned red and reached for a Lychee fruit.

I don't... no...I think I'd better eat some of this feast.

For a normal person, eating with a yakuza would be a problem, but for Butei it's a different case. It's a well established rule of custom.

Besides, my Butei licence hasn't expired yet...

My grandfather would beat me if I let good food go to waste, so I took a piece of shark fin in my chopsticks.

This is... wonderfully delicious! The chef must be very talented and have used the best ingredients.

There is no poison in it, but such wonderful food could well become a danger for the one eating it.

"So, as compensation for your trouble earlier, will this be enough?"

Kikuyo took out a suit case and opened it to reveal 30 million yen in notes packed inside...

"It's fine, the food is enough."

I refused, but I could certainly use one or two of those stacks.

A luxury car, fancy restaurant, and now money–

Giving such expensive gifts is like advertising for the yakuza.

They show off the number of expensive things they have to important people

and companies to prove how well their business is doing and to serve as an open bribe, since they can't put out flashy signs and billboards.

All of the executives were wearing Versace suits and diamond studded Rolexes.

It might have looked like an act, but it wasn't to show off their poor taste, but rather to prove that they 'appreciated the finer things in life'.

All things considered, the message from Kikuyo's group was clear—meant to convey that they were prosperous.

"The modern yakuza don't like to stand out, now do they?"

Taking a bit of Peking Duck, I probed the matter further...

"We are old-fashioned."

...Something in Kikuyo's eyes told me she was hiding something.

Should I investigate further to use up some time? It doesn't look like they'll let me leave after eating just one dish.

"So what does your family do now?"

"Ufu-fu, well what do you think? Drugs, protection, debt collection... we do all kinds of illegal trade. We even have food stalls at festivals! "

"Don't be coy. I at least want to know where the money for this food I'm eating came from."

My face became serious, and as Kikuyo filled my glass with Oolong tea...

"China."

She said in a voice that did not seem to be lying.

...Now I see! The Chinese restaurant should have been a hint. So this has been the point this entire night.

"In the industry, the foreign trade has always been a co-operation between the old families and their supporter organisations, and the Kagataka family was originally one of these supporting organisations. So we never had access to the kind of big jobs that a larger organisation did. Besides that... ever since I took over as the head of the family, we have been ignored in the domestic trade as

well."

So... now I see.

Unlike in the movies, the real underworld is controlled by men.

Having met the executives, I understood that there was no one among them capable of leading the family business, so Kikuyo had inherited the job— and she was at a disadvantage.

"Do you know? Japanese goods are popular in foreign markets, and not just cars and anime. The yakuza too. No matter the country, the mafia welcome us."

I did know that.

Internationally, in the criminal underworld, deep pockets translates to power. The yakuza still hold that power because they are rich in Japanese yen.

"So, in order to turn things around in one go, we have allied ourselves with one of the **big** Chinese organisations. Now, we draw our funds from the Macao Casino region where we have invested. So, of course, it's entirely legal. You can relax and enjoy the food."

Looking like a global investing businesswoman, Kikuyo shot me a seductive sidelong glance.

"Who have you partnered with? If it's the Chinese Mafia, I know a few names."

"It's an armed group with a lot of strength. I think they will suit you. We should meet with them. The Chinese executives just happen to be in Japan right now. It seems they are in the middle of clearing up some kind of international dispute, and I'm sure they would like to meet with a superman like you."

Kikuyo said, omitting the name of the organisation.

This anonymity must be a sticking point with the Chinese. So they have to be a suitably large organisation.

Knock on wood, I'll have to tread carefully.¹⁴

"I think I have to pass. I don't speak Chinese, and I'm not a superman."

"You can't fool me, I know you. Our line of work requires fighting spirit. We

need strong people."

"... So you want me to join your family?"

"That's right! Let's share a cup of sake, then we'll be step-brother and sister¹⁵."

She answered, completely oblivious to the situation... and I could only smile bitterly.

"I already have a little sister."

"You do? Is she a Butei too?"

"Yes. But I didn't know about her until recently."

"If that's the case, then she can join too. The yakuza are always looking for qualified people, even defected Butei. Ex-military, police, and the like, they all have a place with the yakuza. The executive board is unanimous in this decision."

"T-the board..."

"Tohyama, you could become the most famous yakuza in Japan...no, the world. Your name would go down in history, like Al Capone. And with me... as your... first wife... j-just kidding about that part!"

Although she says that she is kidding, I can tell from the look in her eye that she isn't—

"— I don't want to be a yakuza."

I said that after eating her food, but I had to be perfectly clear.

I recalled the special pains I have taken to desperately become a normal person. Becoming a famous criminal, is not something I can do.

"S...so that's how it is? I'm sorry. Master Kou will be so disappointed..."

Saying that.... Kikuyo made a small mistake let a name slip out.

—Kou.

That must be the name of one of the Chinese executives.

Kikuyo seems to have caught her own mistake...

And since I had refused the sake, in the end, our conversation had stalled.

"Well then, I think we'll leave it for tonight..."

She said, and I anticipated words that would allow me to excuse myself—

But she changed the topic which until now had been business talk that had seemed a bit mature for her, and Kikuyo said:

"—Remember the old days?"

As she began to reminisce.

Still in Hysteria Mode, it would make me feel bad to leave abruptly. Of course, Kikuyo knows that all too well, so that's why she changed the subject.

Aware of that, she poured out some jasmine tea.

"Yes...I remember."

"In middle school, when I learned about your condition... I made you do many, many things. I'm sorry. But is it possible... to leave all that in the past?"

I heard Kikuyo whisper in a low, sorrowful voice.

Since complaining about such things is not the manly thing to do:

"It really wasn't that serious— I can't hold a lady's mistakes against her."

It was all so firmly in the past, that I really let it go.

How many times had I been bullied by girls? If I were to write down every little thing that Aria and Riko did to me, I'd be drowning in a sea of notebooks.

Besides, holding on to grudges is a waste of your life. You should just forget about it.

Kikuyo had apologised.

"Oh...!"

Responding to my Hysteria Mode induced words, her face became a mix of happiness and embarrassment... unable to calm herself, Kikuyo rearranged her legs underneath her short kimono.

...Ugh...

This is bad. My Hysteria Mode just got stronger all at once. Resituating herself, Kikuyo exposed her legs so that her upper legs up to the thigh were exposed through the slit down the front...

What I could see had caught my attention. I remembered that Tamamo had said that underwear was not worn with kimonos—

"...Back then, I was bullied too."

As Kikuyo said that, I thought back to those memories and tried to find refuge in them. Calming my mind.

Although Kikuyo has always had a twisted view of the world, for some strange reason she was always our middle-school's most popular girl... she was very popular with the boys and very disliked by the girls in the school.

Kanagawa was a Butei High affiliate, and needless to say, it was meant to help train and shape future Butei.

For Kikuyo, her connections to the underworld were a great asset, but the yakuza are fundamentally seen as the natural enemy of Butei.

And Kikuyo's parents were yakuza.

That was enough to find fault with— and the girls bullied Kikuyo for it.

...And for that, there was no reason not to sympathise with her. Children can't choose their parents.

"I remember. The time that the bullies cut my bathing suit, and you got even with them."

"I remember too."

That was where it all started.

Some of the mean girls played a trick on Kikuyo by messing with her bathing suit. They had secretly cut up Kikuyo's bathing suit and stitched it back together with water-soluble thread so it would come apart after Kikuyo got into the water.

The swimming classes were separated by gender, but ending up half-naked and unable to go home, Kikuyo ran back and hid herself in the shower room and

cried until nightfall.

Then, by chance, I was the one assigned to clean-up duty, and I found her...

Yes, and what happened next, I would rather not recall.

Returning with a spare uniform, Kikuyo changed, and I stayed with her, gently soothing and comforting her until she stopped crying— I understood her feelings and using the power of Hysteria Mode on those girls...

Of course, I didn't hit them, but I got them to agree to do what I wanted.

They all lined up in a row and apologised to Kikuyo, but all of them, Kikuyo included, were Butei in the making. They all began their own investigation of me, and soon after the rebellion occurred...

Not long after, I became the useful 'ally of justice'

"But you might not remember this. Even when you weren't like you are now, you defended me."

Huh...? Suddenly turning red...

Kikuyo said something surprising.

Could that be true...?

Seeing my confused expression, she continued.

"That time when someone stole the money from the classroom lock-box. Everyone acted as if I had stolen it. Everyone... except you."

A~ah! My family has a saying: 'Don't forget what has been done for you, forget what you have done for others' so I had intentionally forgotten it.

"Ah, yes. now I remember."

I'm sure that I was the normal me at that time.

Despite the fact that they were Butei-in-training, they were all too ready to heartlessly jump to a conclusion so I shouted the protest: "No one has any proof, now do they!"

So they let Kikuyo go, and the real culprit was found out later.

Come to think of it... Kikuyo didn't use my Hysteria Mode against me after

that.

"After that, well... I... to you..."

"?"

Kikuyo began to stammer and look away, then looked up to me from where she was sitting. After a brief silence—

"...tried to give you a lo- love le- love letter... I wrote it many times, but... every time, I tore it up. I made you do all of these things, and my guilt wouldn't let me give it to you."

This...

This had become a dangerous topic. One with a completely different danger than the previous one.

"Tohyama. If anyone asks if you have eaten my family's food today— I will deny it."

Kikuyo laid her hand on my arm, while her face showed the she had come to her second point.

"In return, y... you will **be my boyfriend.**"

"Wh-what?"

"You've left Butei High, right? If it was some kind of investigation, you wouldn't be going to that cram school without a gun. We're a bunch of drop-outs, so let's go out together!"

Kikuyo began pulling on the hand that was still on my arm.

I have to find some way to escape using Hysteria Mode, but Kikuyo knows very well how it works. Riko can deftly manipulate me the same way, so I have to be careful.

"Well no, you see I..."

Trying to find words to reject her that won't hurt her, Kikuyo spoke up.

"You don't get it, do you? I'm threatening you, Tohyama!"

I knew it...

Kikuyo, you really are a bad person.

"If I spread your secret, you won't be able to go to a normal school, will you?"

Without using her fists, she struck me where it hurt the most, and she struck without hesitation.

She had probably been planning this all along.

"..."

Keeping quiet, Kikuyo's smile said 'I win'.

"I would have preferred not to have to have had to use this threat, but, you see, our statuses are quite different."

"If that's what you think, then raise your own status and ask again."

"That's... just like you..."

Squeeze!

Kikuyo hugged me with all her strength.

Clinging to me, I felt my Hysteria Mode intensify.

Ever since middle-school, Kikuyo has been attractive. Because of her home-life, she has always seemed more mature. Now she has this sex appeal unlike any other high school girl.

This is not something I could have with Aria who looks like an elementary student. While pondering about how increasingly flustered my Hysteria Mode was making me...

"I wanted to see you again... I want to see you again! My very own, ally of justice. So when I saw you from the car, I knew it was a miracle that I had met you again...!"

My heart pounding, Kikuyo said this with moistened eyes.

If this were the normal me, I would shake off her arm and dash through the nearest window to escape, but...

In Hysteria Mode, I can't. Because it would hurt a girl.

This is bad...!

Because the room had no bed or sofa, I had completely lowered my guard.

And because my opponent was a yakuza, I was on the lookout for armed dangers and so left a gap in my awareness. I neglected to prepare myself for that kind of danger. And she had exploited it.

Kikuyo must have taken great care in planning this out. This is just as elaborate as one of Riko's plots.

"In the car, I managed to stay calm, but— all the while my heart was throbbing. Now... I can't think about anything except you, Tohyama..."

I can't hurt her— What can I say?

There is something. There is this 'Countermeasure' that my older brother, when he called himself Kana, taught to me.

Even though things have gone this far, it's still a 50-50 bet.

If I lose, I will have to join her family. Right in this chair.

"Now then... Kikuyo, can I ask you a question?"

Now I have no choice but to cross that bridge. Come on... Kikuyo!

"What is it?"

"After we're going out... **What do you want me to do to you, Kikuyo?**"

I said with a tender smile, as I gazed into her slightly glazed eyes.

"Eh? T-That... no... something like... I can't say it."

Alright...!

Blushing red for all she was worth, she tried to hide it, but the words stuck in her throat.

"What is it? Won't you tell me, Kikuyo? Come now... Kikuyo."

It's the same technique I used on Aria as a distraction while we were on the jet-ski, 'Woodpecker'.

It's how to deal with a question that is difficult to answer—

If asked a question that you can't answer, in order to prevail, you should reply with another question that the other party cannot readily answer.

This purposeful cycle takes advantage of increased natural female shyness. This is a technique that keeps you from having to answer.

In order to increase the odds of success, I used this during the train-jacking on Shirayuki and added 'Charming Call'.

In short, it's a kind of hypnosis.

"...T-Tohyama thinks about something like that... I could, but..."

She had fallen right into my trap and was squirming helplessly—

Gently, like plucking a flower, I took Kikuyo's hands, and... separated us from each other.

We had crossed it, somehow. Although it was a dangerous bridge.

And Kikuyo...

squeeze!

...sat in her chair, pulled her legs in close, bowed her head, and made herself into a ball.

Her blush reached down to her neck. You are definitely imagining all sorts of things right now.

For that, I am sorry.



The fever successfully drawn out, I began to stroke and caress her head...

"Well then, I must be going."

With that declaration of victory, I stood up from my chair.

Kikuyo was still sitting in that gym class pose, hugging her knees. I doesn't look like she is going to follow me.

Were my caresses so gentle that she fell asleep?

"—Can I ask you something, Tohyama?"

She had not fallen asleep.

"What's that?"

I said as I exited the luxuriously furnished room.

"You had this dead fish-face when you were going into the cram school, but during the yakuza meeting you were lively."

"..."

That was... I can't deny it.

I am perfectly comfortable in the underground world of crime.

There is much more to dazzle the eye there than in a dull school.

—While turning her face, Kikuyo said:

"I won't say anything about that school, but an ex-Butei will never be able to integrate into normal society except on the lowest level. After leaving that school, it's better to become a yakuza. If you have any conditions, we can discuss what it would take to bring you on board..."

She still hasn't given on getting me to join her family.

"I'm sorry. Negotiate is the very thing I can't do. I would betray the yakuza."

"That's just what you've done! Betrayed Butei High in order to go down into normal society."

...She hit me where it really hurts.

That not something I can deny. I—

—can only be silent and retreat.

As I opened the large wooden door with the exquisitely carved Phoenix on it...

"You know it, right? I'm not very patient."

Kikuyo's voice said.

Turning slightly with her head laid down... Her arms still clasping her knees, from the gap between her bangs she glared at me.

Some of the boys liked it because 'it gave them the chills', it was the sharp look when Kikuyo was resentful.

"...I know."

"So you know I'm not good at losing."

"I know that too."

"Really, that is all there is to it. But here's something you don't know."

"Ah?"

"I just realised it myself."

With a *Whoosh!* Kikuyo threw something sharp and pointed–

Drawing a card from inside her sleeve, she threw it like a shuriken.

With a solid *Thunk*, it stuck into the door right before my eyes.

Since I knew she didn't intend to hit me, I didn't move to avoid it, but it cut one or two strands of my hair in its path.

"...?"

Looking at it, it was a platinum credit card. With the corners' edges sharpened like knives..

"–The PIN is 1111. Compensation for your trouble today, so use it as much as you want."

"I told you I didn't want it. Don't you know? I don't like pushy girls very much."

"Well, then I guess... I won't be pushy. Tohyama... have a good night."

Grasping her knees and hiding her face, Kikuyo waved goodbye.

And now, to finish my escape... but...

It was all due to the power of Hysteria Mode.

I tried hard to become a normal person, and despite the fact that I had achieved it to some extent—Hysteria Mode will play some role in my life.

I escaped Butei High, I escaped Kikuyo...

I can't escape myself. I am who I am.

I can't run forever.

No, I absolutely cannot run away. Because I am me.

If I could, what would I do? I...

I...

1. The kanji for 'rice' can be seen as a composite of all the kanji for the number 88 八+十+八 = 米 $((8 \times 10) + 8 = 88)$. Basically, there is a lot of work that goes into it, and it should be appreciated, not greedily eaten.

2. Famous swordsman and wandering samurai reputed in tales to have sat down and intimidated his enemies by idly catching a flies with chopsticks.

3. The Kanji for the name Kinzou are the ones for 'Gold' and 'Three'

4. Traditional Japanese short formal coat. Kinji's family wear traditional Japanese clothing at home.

5. 'Gap-school' is a term I made up. There are special school in Japan to help students who take a year off before starting university to improve test scores and get into better schools

6. Doraemon reference to the oversized bully character in the animated series.

7. Seems to be a fictional island, but in Russian, 'blesk' means 'bright' or 'dazzling'.

8. A game where children sit on the ground with the backs facing each other

and try to stand by pushing their backs together.

9. The Japanese onomatopoeia for mouse squeaks is identical to the one for kissing sounds.

10. ‘Bousouzoku’ in the original—Organised groups of young people under 20 that ride heavily modified motorbikes and drive recklessly or disrupt traffic for thrills. Asao and Fujikibayashi are wannabe Bousouzoku.

11. As previously stated, Ukemi is martial arts training to fall safely and minimise damage.

12. A famous Dior perfume apparently.

13. Japanese Mythological Palace located at the bottom of the sea.

14. Actually Kinji says ‘Kuwabara Kuwabara’. It’s a folk charm to ward off misfortune.

15. Seems to be a ritual connected to joining the yakuza. The prospective member drinks from the same cup of sake as the one admitting them to the group.

Chapter 5: Enlightening Emptiness

Walking back home late that night, the effects of Hysteria Mode wore off...

With the tension released, I sprawled out on all fours. Ashamed of my actions, I crawled along the streets

I-I shuddered at how badly I had made a mess of things.

Snubbing the yakuza's hospitality like that, and patting the head of their leader.

Just what the hell were you thinking... Hysterised me!?

When I am in Hysteria mode, this sense of an alternate reality builds up, so that when I look back on everything I do it feels like waking up from a dream.

In reality, I was able to successfully defeat Count Dracula, infiltrate a crowded nuclear submarine with only a gun and blade, and knock down a missile with my bare hands while in that state.

I wish it could all be just a dream. But that is the kind of ending I hate the most. The god in charge of my story wouldn't write such an ending.

I left Butei High in order to become a normal person...

But 10 days later, I am drinking tea with the yakuza!

Kikuyo is sure to follow me around. Sooner or later, she will appear again.

What can I do?

Now with Hysteria Mode dispersed, I can't think of anything. To top it all off, I am more useless than usual.

After entering Hysteria Mode, I always become drowsy and sluggish.

I'll take a day off from school tomorrow...

But I can't do what I did in INQUESTA and buy Riko a game to mimic my voice and answer roll call for me.

I haven't been good with attendance at that school anyway. I really should go.

First of all, I should show my unconquerable warrior spirit by standing up...

And like a newborn foal, I stood wobbling...

"Even if you crawl, I won't throw you any money, Tohyama."

From the top of a lamp post, I heard a preschool-like voice.

Looking up at the owner of the voice— *Whoosh!* I hastily averted my eyes.

I don't want to see them.

"Do not act as if you do not wish to see me!"

With a pounce, her short miniskirt flipped completely up (I didn't see but I guessed), landing in front of me was— Tamamo.

The girl-shaped fox. Or maybe it is the fox-shaped girl.

C-come on... give me a break...!

I'm trying to become a responsible citizen.

"Why have you stirred outside the exorcism barrier¹? Since days of old, you Tohyama warriors have been unpredictable."

I drooped my head... and since it could not be avoided, I raised it again to look Tamamo straight in the eyes.

One of the reasons I had looked away was the fact that although Tamamo was dressed like a preschooler, she was wearing a short miniskirt.

I didn't see it for myself, but shouldn't her tail be lifting the skirt, fully exposing her underwear?

"How is this? With these garments I look like a normal maiden, do I not?"

With a spin, she twirled a 360 in place.

I was worried— but thanks to the difference in our respective heights, I did not see anything dangerous. Thank goodness.

"Maiden, you say... Even though you are 800 years old..."

She was wearing a cap with ears, but inside it her real ears were wagging and

her tail shaking—although there is the slightest chance that someone would overlook that, it's still strange.

Tamamo is pretending to be a kindergartner, but she looks to be about 7 or 8 years old.

That means she would have had to repeat kindergarten. But it looks like I might have to repeat a year of high school, so I don't have any room to speak.

I should buy clothes for her so that she would blend in with society better... but if I, a high-school boy, were to buy clothes for a little girl, I'd probably be reported.

A policeman would mark me out as a suspected child abductor.

I'm not interested in picking up any more labels, so I should steer clear. I know that much.

"So, what are you doing here?"

She asked, staring blankly up at me with her rounded fox eyes...

"...I really don't know."

I answered truthfully.

She wore an temple offertory box on her back like a kindergartner's backpack, following me as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Thinking about it, it must look like I am escorting an elementary school girl to some kind of X-rated cosplay. It is late at night after all.

And so, avoiding the glances of strangers, we sneaked back to my house...

Reki's shoes were in the genkan. It seems that she made it home safely after we separated at the cram school.

"Tohyama. We ought to conduct a purification ceremony. Your unhappiness may be due to possession of an evil spirit. We should exorcise it."

You can exorcise an evil spirit. You can't exorcise yourself. That's physically impossible. ²

"Oi! Hold on...!"

If my grandfather found out that I brought an elementary school girl to my house, he'd line up the firing squad without waiting for a court-martial—

With quick steps, Tamamo passed down the corridor toward the bathroom

By 'purification', did you mean take a bath...!?

Yes, now I recall that Konayuki used those Shinto religious terms as well.

And so, before telling Reki what had happened after we left the cram school—

I ended up following Tamamo directly into the bathroom.

"These modern clothes are so difficult to remove."

"...*Gasp!*..."

Grunting with the effort, Tamamo was... already half naked...!

She was wearing a pair of underwear that looked like it had been stolen from that little brat Aya Hiraga's wardrobe, but then with a *Swish!*...

Sh-she's...! completely naked...!

If my grandfather or grandmother were to discover this, I'd be in for a full course of corporal punishment.

—Run!

As I intended to back up the corridor from the changing room we were in...

"Hey! Stop wasting time. Can you not see that I require someone to help me bathe?"

"Don't be so loud...!"

Although I could sense that everyone is asleep for the night, if someone were to wake up... it would be "The End of Kinji"...!

S-so I can't help it. I will have to take part in this coerced bathing event as well.

Goddammit! Out of the frying pan and into the fire. Today has been an unlucky day unlike any other. There have been altogether too many unlucky days.

And so I began to undress sullenly.

"Tohyama, place me upon thy shoulders. I want to use that new bar of soap."

Jumping up and down while her tail swished from side to side, stretching her washboard squid body while trying to reach the milk-based soap on the top shelf.

"I think that's the family's soap... For you, the dog shampoo they use for Haimaki should be good enough."

Despite my grumbling, I grabbed the soap.

As if I would put a naked elementary schoolgirl on my shoulders.

Besides when it comes to hygienics, doing that before a bath is questionable.

B-but... does she really expect me to wash her? Just now this mini-person said that she needed someone to help her bathe.

Although I don't go for younger girls, when it comes to Hysteria Mode I'm fine, but if she wants me to wash her naked body, I can't express the same confidence.

She might be tiny, but Tamamo does have a feminine form...!

This situation might be more dangerous than when I ate with the yakuza... what should I do..!?

What is the god in charge of my story thinking? Is he an idiot?

It would be a problem if this naked elementary school girl made a fuss. More dangerous than being abducted by the yakuza.

And with the testimony of three Butei, my guilt would be a foregone conclusion. As for school, I'd spend the rest of my time in a reform school.

If I get into the bath with her I'm in for hell, and if I leave I'm in for hell...!

All at once, as I covered myself with a towel, the sliding, frosted glass door to the bath slid open... Huh...?

I saw a wall of steam in front of me. I was grateful because now Tamamo was obscured.

"..."

It seems that someone left the hot water tap running.

Ah, what a waste!

Our bath is large, but it isn't a public bath.

"..."

I tried to escape reality but...

"—It appears that I shouldn't have wasted the time worrying about you after all."

From beyond the steam, I was accosted by Reki's angry voice.

Since her presence was almost imperceptible, I did not notice until after entering the bath, but...

Why... what is she doing here...!?

"Oh, so the Azure Maiden Reki is here as well."

Tamamo said something baffling as she waved her tail like a fan to disperse the steam—

Seeing me enter the bath with a young girl as if it were the most natural thing in the world, I saw Reki's mouth compress into a tight '^\' shape... Reki was already in the bath tub.



And of course, Mint-chan Yada was stark naked as well...!

Her shoulders were slightly reddened by the bath water, and her figure was adorned by glistening water droplets from the bath.

I really need to get out of here. But there's Tamamo. If I were to leave and she made a loud fuss, I would start my life a convicted felon.

So even though I am not in Hysteria Mode, I set my brain to the task of figuring out how 3 people can bathe in on bath.

Then it hit me.

H-hurry Kinji! With how fast you had that flash of inspiration, you might have hysterised already...!

Snatching the bath bucket from Tamamo's hands—

Whoosh! *Swish! Swish!*

Using the 'High-speed bathing' technique that I had devised a while ago in case Shirayuki or Riko tried to force their way into my bath, I bathed myself in an instant.

I covered myself with soap from head to toe, and probably because of the strange movements that accompanied this technique, Tamamo and Reki drew back, giving me some space—

Washing my hair quickly, I turned toward the tub—

"R-Reki. Get out here and bathe Tamamo."

Eyes shut, I carefully entered the tub with my back turned.

Then, as you might expect of this inconsiderate behaviour, or because she was angry that I had brought the naked Tamamo into the bath... As we passed, Reki struck my undefended head, but...

She didn't put too much force behind it.

She used her hands in this gentle way as if to say: 'I'm glad you're safe.'

Ever since we dropped out, I've noticed that Reki's actions have become more and more human.

Sure, she's still as expressionless as ever, but now...

Probably because she is used to washing animals, Reki is scrubbing Tamamo

down.

Behind the screen of steam she is skillfully bathing her. But as she was shampooing her tail...

"As I thought, Tohyama! Not only the Himiko, but the Rimiko is also your woman!"³

Remarking that to me, where should I begin to correct her?

"Who is this 'Rimiko'?"

"That refers to me."

Said Reki.

"I sort of gathered that, but... are you a miko?"

"In my homeland, I performed the duties of what is known in Japan as a 'miko'. I have excused myself from that role, but the Wind has put my intention to resign on hold."

The...Wind...

I had thought that the idea of 'The Wind' was all in Reki's head, but...

It seems to have something to do with Irokane. Specifically the Ririirokane.

But this is a topic I don't like to deal with, so to avoid getting involved, I won't ask any more questions.

"Himiko, Rumiko, Rimiko, these are the three types of Irokane mikos."⁴

Ms. Rumiko, please don't appear! Shirayuki and Reki are quite enough to deal with! Please don't show up! Don't even think about it!

"... In short, Shirayuki and Reki are similarly mikos. But the kind of Irokane that they are linked with differs."

"Augh! I give up. If you are going to keep talking, talk about something else!"

My spirit has already been worn down by my unfortunate encounter with Leon. Talk like that will completely exhaust my mental strength, and I'll faint and drown in the bathtub.

"Hmm... Perhaps it is as you say, and the only thing the Tohyama are suited to

is battle."

If that's the case, then don't make me help you bathe.

"As for another topic... Oh, that's right! Far East Warfare. The last battle between DEEN and GRENEDA."

Enough already! My HP has already hit zero!

"I've had a telegram from Europe. Meiya of the Vatican sallied forth to attack Katze, the Witch of Cursed Water. But without decisive victory—They both retreated to their own bases, and afterward Liberty Mason's exorcists traveled to Berlin from London to capture the weakened Katze. They should be searching for her as we speak."

Saying that, she sketched out the military positions like pieces on a game-board.

A game like that including a map of Europe would sell well.

I continued to listen to Tamamo as if it were someone else's problem that I was hearing.

"Sooner or later our forces in Europe will be depleted, and they will send to Tokyo for reinforcements."

Tamamo glanced at me.

"...Don't look at me. I won't go. I absolutely won't do something like going overseas."

But, even as I give an absolute refusal... for some reason I have this jinx that makes my refusal into a reality. So I shouldn't say any more.

Besides, there's the Karagane—if we don't recover the thing that housed the Hidan that Sherlock shot into Aria from the members of GRENEDA within the next few years—won't Aria become the calamitous Scarlet Goddess?

Even so, such talk seems like a fantasy.

But if Aria's level of brutal violence were drastically increased, she might just split the globe in a fight with me over the television channel.

For the sake of everyone in the world, that is something that must be

avoided.

"Well, when it come to the matter of Sherlock shooting Aria with the Hidan, I was a part of that... So I will have to do something about the Karagane."

"When it comes to the Karagane, I have sensed that one piece has crossed back into Japan from Shanghai. Probably with Rampan."

Ugh... It turns out the board-game was not someone else's problem...

"...There's something I'm a little nervous about, Tamamo. Your detection ability, does GRENEA have anyone that has an ability like it?"

"Everyone has the ability. Even in a dark room, you can sense that someone is in the room with you, can't you? Birds, fish, animals, and even humans have this powerful ability. My kind has only developed it to an extraordinary degree."

"Then, if GRENEA has someone with supernatural powers like yours... Wouldn't they be aware of our own movements?"

"It's probably safe to think so. The enemy's last movement was probably prompted by the Baskerville General stirring outside of the exorcism barrier. "

I'm... a general? I'd rather be demoted to private.

But in any case I'm just a single piece in 'Far East Warfare'—this game of superhumans with Asia as its map.

**Sigh*... I want to become a normal human quickly...*

But, as I thought, there really is no way for me to become an ordinary person. Not even here.

After that, Tamamo slipped on some soap and fell into the bathtub in a stereotypical performance that is impossible to describe—even in modern light novels—, fainted, and sank to the bottom of the tub.

Not wanting to know what kind of curse would fall upon my family if a god died under our roof, Reki and I lifted her out together.

I didn't know which part of her I had grabbed, but I realised it was her tail...

I should consider the fact that Tamamo's back was turned toward me as the

drop of happiness in my misfortune. Just thinking if it had been the front makes my spine freeze.

If I had hysterised because of Tamamo, I would have had to commit seppuku with the Scientific Swordswoman Kaname to behead me afterward.

Returning alive from that life-and-death bath, it was about midnight.

I-I'm exhausted...

I crashed onto my futon with a flop.

A bath is supposed to be relaxing... but now I'm somehow more exhausted than before.

But bathing with two girls and managing not to hysterise, I want to praise my own powers of endurance.

The fact that 'immediately after hysterising it is harder to hysterise again' could be said to be a positive side effect.

"So, when are you leaving?"

I asked Tamamo who was wearing a sailor suit uniform that the Butei High interns wore and gulping down milk from the carton she held in both hands — plundered from my family's refrigerator — as she sat seiza on my futon.

"Uhmm... I plan to stay for a while. I'm going to haunt you and be your personal bodyguard."

She answered, with her breath smelling of milk.

'Haunt me', you've already been doing that.

"Well, maybe as a ball..."

I said, voicing my thoughts...

But carrying a Japanese ball doesn't fit my character.

It's not like I fit in at school, anyway. But if I start carrying something strange like that, no one will come near me.

"... No, not that, if you want me to carry you around, you'll have to become something inconspicuous."

"Something inconspicuous? Hmm..."

Saying that, Tamamo's tail bent into a '?’ shape as she considered it, and I finally went off to sleep.

Lately I've had trouble with insomnia, but after hysterising, I slept much more soundly.

This too is a drop of happiness in the midst of my misfortune.

...but tomorrow...

How will I face them at school?

My classmates saw me: The fight in front of the cram school.

There were many eyewitnesses who saw how I dealt with Leon before the police arrived. There are too many mouths to keep quiet. And Moe saw everything.

Now... everyone will be afraid of me, hate me. That's for sure.

Until now, it seemed like they ignored me, but now things will be difficult.

Tomorrow, how am I supposed to go on at school...?

"Kinji-san... If you don't get up now, you are going to be late..."

Reki, the human alarm clock was waking me up....

For some reason, my futon in nice and warm.

"?"

Thinking about what it could be... Th-this is... peeling back the blankets, it was just as I thought–Tamamo was sleeping soundly.

And she was using me as a body pillow.

Reki immediately stiffened with a sour expression, while at the same time:

"...That's my Aniki for you. He doesn't discriminate and no game is too big. I respect that.

G-3 said as he read the family scrolls on the walls.

"N-no, this isn't a kidnapping or anything...!"

I tried to explain, while Tamamo stirred with a mewing sound and pawed at me.

"This is a god, a real one. Even more powerful than our Tsukumo. You've had a god working for you this whole time?"

G-god you say. If she's a god, then I'm becoming an atheist.

"As for her working for me... Ow-ow-wow-wow! Oi, what are you trying to do Tamamo!?"

"Inarizushi."⁵

Saying that while half asleep, Tamamo had begun chewing on my hand so that I had to beat her in order to get her to let go.

W-what sharp teeth you have, Tamamo! They're as sharp as Aria's.

In the end, because of having to deal with a sniper, god, and Genion, I was a little late that morning.

When I get to school—my seat will still be there, won't it?

Because the students had seen me act violently, they might begin agitating for my expulsion by taking away my desk.

Worried, I peeked into the classroom from the corridor, and it seems that Homeroom has already started.

My desk is still there, but... my neighbor Moe, is absent.

She has broken her record of perfect attendance that she has held since kindergarten.

But this isn't the time to be worrying about someone else...

So, timidly...

"...Sorry I'm late."

I quietly opened the sliding door at the back of the classroom, and slipped in..

As soon as I set foot in the classroom, everyone turned to look at me.

And in unison,

"Waaaaah!"

But it wasn't a cry of fear. They were cheering me with smiles on their faces.

The entire class. As soon as they saw me.

"...? ? ?"

As I stood there without a clue as to what was happening, first the athletic boys stood up—

They crowded around me energetically, as if they wanted to hoist me onto their shoulders.

"Tohyama, I can't believe it! Is it true that you beat up a big bruiser yesterday!?"

They said, their eyes all a-sparkle.

"N-no, I just got lucky... I'm really clumsy. My body just sort of moved, and the other guy had already fallen down."

"But I saw it, and it didn't look like that to me! Were you boxing?"

That was my opponent.

"I've never seen anything like it! Do you come from a family of ninjas, or something?"

That's my Amica Fuuma.

"No, you see.. I... that..."

From all sides, the excitement grew until I was assaulted with a barrage of question, and before I knew it, I was also surrounded by girls noisily showering me with adulation.

In this too unexpected situation, all I could do was look around me like a cornered crook.

In other words, Homeroom was interrupted because of me...

Thinking that, I turned toward the teacher's desk where Gori was watching the scene, and his expression said: 'Yes, it's fine, go on.'

Seeing that, I finally understood...

...Ah...

So that's it.

Everyone was tired of these ordinary, boring days—

I was not the only one at this school. Everyone else was tired of it.

Where nothing ever happened, and there was unbroken peace, they were starved for excitement.

And then, I had beaten back the obviously ruffianly looking Leon—

Or opened a wind-hole, as Aria would say.

Afterwards, during class breaks, my classmates kept asking me things like:

"You must be really strong, right?"

"Tohyama, that guy must have been a washed-up boxer!"

"What style do you practice?"

To which I replied, respectively:

"Not really."

"I knew that."

"None in particular."

I tried to say as little as possible in response, but my popularity could only increase from there.

Forget breaks, during the lunch period there was another Tohyama-mania craze as the boys and girls from neighboring classes invaded our classroom...

A-at this rate, It will be hard for me to stay at this school, but for a wholly different reason...

So holding my head, and being unable to even leave the classroom—

A tall lanky student unexpectedly appeared.

"C'moooon! Don'cha see y'all only buggin' 'im!"

With this horribly enunciated rebuke, he dispersed the students that held me under house arrest.

And over there shooing everyone away.... was Asao, wearing his uniform properly,

That must mean that the thin student is Fujikibayashi? I didn't recognise him because his hair is dyed black

"S'all right, Kinji. Everyone in this lot is definitely gonna want to bug you today."

"You should leave quickly."

I thought that both Fujikibayashi and Asao hated me, but for some reason I don't understand, they are helping me—

"Y-yes, you really saved me."

I thanked them honestly, and with those two acting as guards, I escaped the classroom.

—As expected of a bunch of yankees⁶, the knew of a good place to hide.

I hadn't noticed it, but up above the roof, on top of the big school clock there was another rooftop.

No one comes here.

Going up a concealed service ladder, I was finally able to pause to take a breath.

The view was pretty good, and I gazed out over downtown Ikebukuro...

"Please, let what happened between us be water under the bridge. I'm sorry."

"Sorry!"

Side-by-side, Fujikibayashi and Asao bowed.

I can't really remember you hurting me, so you don't need to apologise...

Or so I was thinking, but they are men bowing their heads, so...

"Understood."

I merely replied.

At that, they seemed relieved and sitting in seiza looked up to me smiling.

It's a look of expectation..

It's as if they expected to hear me chew them out.

"... Weren't the two of you suspended?"

"We're done finished."

'Done finished'?...It seems that Fujikibayashi has more trouble with Japanese than I do.

It reminds me of Shirayuki's 'Kin-chan-sama' using two honorifics.

"We is in the same class."

'We is'?... Whatever.

"To tell the truth, we wanted to stop coming to school, but... Kinji-san is here, so we kept coming."

Asao said in a low voice, to which I replied with a 'Huh?'...

"We told Gori, and it made him happy."

Fujikibayashi said smiling.

Ahh... So that's why he didn't ask too many questions about my violent encounter off school grounds.

Gori-sensei. So that's it. Keeping students from dropping out of your class can only be good for your career.

"So you are going to come to school... then what are your plans afterwards?"

I asked, just for reference–

"Kinji-san, just like you are going to attend a cram school and work hard... I am going to study hard too. I want to become a doctor. That'll make me popular."

"I'm gonna take over my pop's fishing business. But my mama says I gotta finish high school."

Huuuu...?

These hooligans have their futures better planned than I do.

"But really Kinji-san, yesterday was super totally unbelievable! Leon might be an old East Ikebukuro student, but he's a real pain as a person, right?"

Even though we were classmates, Fujikibayashi had used honorifics in order to start sucking up to me.

"That might be true..."

I said that, but Leon—had climbed up onto the roof...!

He was wearing an old school uniform, and apparently he tailed Fujikibayashi and Asao and sneaked into his old school. In order to find me.

Fujikibayashi and Asao's faces turned as red as tomatoes, and even I was a little surprised—

"—I'm not giving you a revenge match, Leon. How did things go with the Kagataka Family?"

"They kicked me out. I'm fine though."

Just in case, I looked him over...he didn't look particularly injured.

Aside from the bandage over his nose from my kick.

"I'm here on orders from the Family, but even so... I'm sorry. Please forgive me..."

In a louder voice than Asao had used, dropped and bowed on the spot.

Ah! I get it. He had tracked me down in fear, and came to make his apology.

I should be the one apologising though.

In our fight...

I vented all of my stress on you.

"That's enough, it's really not necessary. If you don't pick a fight with me, I won't raise a hand against you. Live your life the way you want to."

Slightly embarrassed, I unilaterally ended the conversation.

Then he stayed quiet for a while...

He was different than Fujikibayashi and Asao, and he studied me with his semi-pro eye.

"... Are you sure that you're simply human?"

"I'm not very sure, but I hope to be one."

"Let me be your little brother!"

This... again...?

"I told Kikuyo the same thing: I have enough younger brothers."

I said harshly.

"I'm not used to the kind of 'games' you play. I'm just an amateur. If you want to be delinquents, then do whatever you want. Fight if you want to. If you get suspended or arrested because of it, it's your life. But don't drag me into it."

I took the opportunity to look at Fujikibayashi and Asao and turn them down as I said this...

And one by one, they all nodded. They looked a little disappointed, and I felt a small twinge of guilt.

As a rule, I dislike those kind of 'problem children' that act out but...

I couldn't help but feel a little sympathy for them. I was a problem child too at my old school.

But this is no good. I have to clearly sever our ties here.

I have no intention of becoming an outlaw.

"I want to pass my days in this school normally. I tried to peacefully integrate into society and live a tranquil life. So I don't want to be bothered by your problems. Got it?"

I repeated myself, and Fujikibayashi and Asao both nodded at the same time.

They must be good friends.

But...

Leon looked like he had something that he wanted to say, but he swallowed

his words. And his close cropped head nodded agreement.

Then I began to feel something—

Grrrrrr!

The grave tone of the scene was ruined by the sound rumbling from my stomach.

At lunch today, everyone had rained a hail of questions on me, and because of that, I hadn't eaten anything.

"You're hungry! Be right back!"

Fujikibayashi's face suddenly lit up, and he decided to be the errand boy and run to buy something to eat...

Before I could say 'No thanks', he had already dashed off and disappeared.

Haa... but if I left now I would only be mobbed by everyone again. So I just ate while waiting for my classmates to either leave for home or go to their clubs.

Fujikibayashi ran to the nearby Yoshinoya⁷ location, and bought a big bowl of gyudon, a cup of miso soup, and a lot of soft-boiled eggs.

As the smell of Yoshinoya gyudon is like that of McDonald's, having a scent that could stimulate anyone's appetite...

Seeing me receive this food, it seemed like Asao and Leon did not want to be outdone and without missing a beat, they also left, and after a while—

They offered me a tribute out of a travel bag.

A *T-Tokkoufuku...*!⁸

I'm holding a gaudy Bousouzoku-style coat.

And on its white back, 'In all Heaven and Earth, I alone am worthy of honour'⁹ had been embroidered, but... they messed up on one character.

"Kinji-san this is so perfect for you!"

"We want you to wear it. Although they have broken up, this is from my old gang, the legendary—"

Asao and Leon began explaining the origins of the coat. They apparently didn't hear what I had just said, and as I was quivering with rage so that I was about to snap the chopsticks that came with the food...

Tap! *Tap!* *Tap!* *Tap!* *Tap!* *Tap!*

There was a tapping on my shoulder.

But I couldn't see the hand responsible.

G-G-3! I told you not to follow me...!

But this guy doesn't listen to anything I tell him to do.

But what's this? English Morse Code?

'Nice coat. Can I have it...?'

You like things like that? But loud, flashy things must be G-3's style.

Pretending to scratch my shoulder, I tapped a message in Japanese on my younger brother's hand in reply: 'Don't follow me again, Kinzou.' as I said aloud:

"I won't wear it, but my younger brother will love it."

I have to get out of here soon...

But checking, there were still a lot of students at school.

With a sigh, I sat down again, and Asao took out a beer can and started drinking.

"Oi! You shouldn't drink alcohol!"

"It's no big deal. The can might say that it's harmful to minors, but.."

"That's not what I'm worried about. I'm talking about your control. In a fight, alcohol... will hurt your response time."

Caught up in the Butei-esque atmosphere... I slipped and said that.

Asao looked happy at my teacher-like reprimand and closed the can–

Now Fujikibayashi and Leon were looking at me in obvious expectancy.

They were hoping I'd give them some other advice like what I had just said.

I still can't leave, so there's no help for it. I'll kill some time chatting with

these guys.

Rather, I couldn't help but say something to them.

The secret of my level of experience was already out, so I'll give these three a few tips on personal safety.

With a slightly serious expression, I turned to face them.

"From now on... Fujikinayashi, you should stop wearing your earrings."

"Huh? Too flashy?"

"No, but when you grapple with someone, they are going to be ripped out. That was what I was taught."

His eyes glistening at my frank advice, Fujikibayashi took out his earrings.

"...Leon. You have the bad habit of hanging your arm outside the car window like you did yesterday. "

"Hmmm?"

"Fix it. You're going to break an arm."

I said several thing like this that Ranbyou had taught to us...

...Checking back every now and again until the number of students had thinned out.

"From here on out— There is nothing between us. There's nothing good that can come out of it. By thy way, Leon..."

Standing up, I turned to look back at Leon—

I gave him one final heartfelt warning.

"That Makarov. Was it the Family's or yours?"

"...It's mine."

"Have you looked it over?"

"No..."

"It was full of dirt and debris from being fired. Forget a disassembly, it looked like it had not received even normal maintenance. When you pointed the gun at

me, your posture was sloppy. How can you carry a gun when you don't know how to aim, fire, or care for it?"

"..."

"I gave it back to you that time, but someone who carries a gun has a certain duty. They accept the moral responsibility that at some point in time, it might be necessary to use it. If you draw a weapon needlessly, it will cause everyone around to panic. That is what happened yesterday. If you take it without necessity, not only your enemy, but there's the chance that everyone carrying one nearby could also draw theirs. It could be me. Or maybe some policeman. And let me tell you, a policeman will shoot to kill. Between a rookie who drew his gun without thinking, and a professional trained to use it—Think hard about which one is more likely to survive."

"..."

"You should understand this. An amateur should not be carrying a gun. The only one who should be carrying a gun is someone whose job requires them to do so. The American law that is slowly lifting the ban on the sale of old weapons is wrong. Nowadays, you can get a used Saturday Night Special for 7,000 yen¹⁰. Your gun goes for about 30,000.¹¹ And if you go flashing your gun around recklessly,— it will be a double suicide. For you and your gun."

It looks like if you really took the time to speak honestly, he would understand...

Leon remained silent, listening to my frank words.

"Ask yourself, is your life worth so little to you? If you've given up on being a yakuza, you should get rid of it."

I concluded my speech.

"...I understand. I'll take it to a collection point tonight and get rid of it."

Leon said, seeming to have taken what I said to heart.

He's not talking about using a vise to destroy it, but rather disposing of it in the official manner...

But I had handled it by illegally disposing of the bullet prize from the Sports

Festival a while ago by burying them. What does that say about me?

The next morning, Tamamo used her powers of transformation to turn into a 'Road Safety Amulet'.

I took her to school, wearing it under my shirt.

I thought she had been quietly keeping watch or sleeping in her own 'dimension', but she had plundered my Nintendo DS and had been idling the entire time.

Such a care-free god...

Grumbling about this NEET god, I avoided everyone as they left the few scattered school buildings and slipped away—

In the sunset, I picked up Reki wearing her poker face in front of the school gate and headed home.

"We're home...!"

As we arrived home, G-3 was putting the last few touches on his constructed greenhouse.

In the sitting room, Kaname is sitting in front of my late father's shogi board, reading a book written by Shogi Master Habu.

My grandmother was playing the koto in the living room... That song... is the same one Shirayuki plays, isn't it?

Well, it is a well-known song, I guess.

Out from under the eye of my grandmother, my grandfather is reading.

He's put a cover on it, but judging from his grinning face, it's one of his precious French Shoin books.[12](#)

Giving this ordinary scene a sideways glance, I entered the six tatami room that was mine.

"..."

Swish! *Swish!*

My room is separated from the next where Reki stays by only a sliding screen. Because the noise of Reki changing out of her uniform is too exciting, I left my room and went out onto the porch to pass the time in watching the glistening snow that was still falling from the sky.

The sun is already low in the sky.

Well, how to say it...?

Today was a hard day at school, I'm being haunted by a fox spirit, and there are several strange things going on at my house—

Despite that, I get the feeling that I am becoming an ordinary person. But I also feel like there is something that can destroy this sense of peace.

I'm thinking of something Kana told me:

When people leave behind their old norm—they have new experiences and learn from them. By doing that, they will establish a new norm.

...That's how I feel.

I wouldn't have had these experiences if I hadn't left Butei High.

I learned a lot there that I couldn't elsewhere.

But—what Kana said had a continuation:

But if a person isn't where they need to be, they will never fit in.

...I watch the snow for little while and pondered this...

"Kinji-san, it is almost time for dinner."

I had no idea how long she had stood there, Reki pointed this out to me—

Lately Reki has taken to wearing her Butei High sailor suit around the house.

The family and boarder all together, we ate a bountiful meal... afterwards, since even the strangest of pets must be vaccinated, Reki took Haimaki for his inoculations— Since night time was the only time that such business could operate, Reki took him to a certain veterinary in Nerima. Since there were several kinds of inoculations, Reki and Haimaki had been going there twice a

week.

As for me...

Despite lecturing Leon about it, I myself wasn't maintaining my Beretta at all. So I thought I should check it once in awhile, and took out the gun from the cabinet...eh?

Someone had actually cleaned and serviced it. It was a modified gun, yet the maintenance was done perfectly. There were even fresh traces of lubricating oil.

...?

Turning it over in my non-Hysteria Mode brain...

My mobile suddenly began playing 'Hana no Uchi ni'¹³.

I picked up, but the number was strange to me.

"...Hello?"

I spoke a single word–

"–It's just awful, Tohyama. Using your henchman like that."

The voice answered with a suppressed smile.

It was Kikuyo.

It seems like she got my number from somewhere.

"...What do you mean?"

I had a bad feeling about this, so I listened instead of hanging up...

"Hmmm. I see. It was nothing. I was checking."

"...?"

"Changing topics– I had a little chat with Moe Mochizuki and asked what she is to you."

–!

That must be why Moe was absent today, even though she had perfect attendance.

It was Kikuyo...!

"...You kidnapped her, didn't you?"

"Don't say something so scandalous. I just wanted to invite you back to my table again, but when I started talking in the cafe she freaked out! I thought she was a quiet girl, but she has guts! So I had her stay until she calms down."

"...!"

Now she's done it. She's taken a hostage.

"But back to the topic of your henchmen. Leon tailed us with Asao and Fujikibayashi to the shop where Moe and I were going to have tea. And then, as my people were trying to calm Moe down—those three idiots just burst in!"

"What...?!"

"Fufufu! I had to protect myself. But no matter what, the three of them wouldn't give up your name. No matter how we asked—they only said that it was **someone**, and Moe had nothing to do with their friend, and I should let Moe go so that they could live a peaceful life."

Until now Kikuyo had mixed in laughter with her words...

"—The yakuza can't let that go. The four of them are your people. How are you going to pay for this?"

Now her true colours were exposed as Kikuyo's voice became cold and serious.

"You haven't killed them?"

"Of course not. They're alive. For now."

"I want proof."

"I thought you'd say that. —Here, Moe. It's your unrequited love."

Kikuyo's voice sounded slightly farther away...

Sounds of a struggle, and then a muffled voice...

"Tohyama-kun, don't come..."

After saying that, Moe was gagged again...

I'm sure that was Moe's voice, and I paled.

"...Tohyama. Let me tell you two facts: First, over 8,000 people are reported missing every year. Second, the yakuza know places where something can be buried and no one ever finds it."

"Threats... they've always been your specialty."

"What now? You're making me feel bad. They're just facts. You can find them written in books."

She's an ex-Butei, and an ex-member of LEZZAD. That makes her hard to deal with,

There's a well-known saying around Butei High: ASSAULT is weak against LEZZAD.

If you want a historical comparison, it's like the relationship between the samurai and ninjas.

The samurai were stronger. They carried good swords, and were excellent swordsmen.

They had good food and, via hard training, strong bodies. And since they lived in fortified castles, their defence was perfect.

Anyone who wanted to kill them—for whatever reason—was unable to.

Attacking head-on.

But if they were attacked **from behind**, they could be killed.

That's what the ninja did.

A ninja never fought like a warrior in a spectacular way. They would creep in close unnoticed, use long-ranged weapons, attack while their enemy was sleeping, use poison, and any method that could be called 'sneaky'.

But they never thought it was shameful. They only cared about winning, and this was practically the opposite of rigid discipline.

This was how Kikuyo had been trained—as an intelligence gathering operative, this was how she worked. Such people regularly take hostages.

Even the 'Western Ninja' Watson was able to kidnap Aria.

And although the tactics were only slightly different, I've been played the same way. A Butei from ASSAULT falling into a cliche trap.

"—So, how about another date? Moe is anxious to see you as well—"

Leaving me with those words, Kikuyo ended the call and sent a map to my e-mail, whose address she had probably gotten from Moe's mobile.

It was Kikuyo... the Head of the Family's, main residence.

'Come if you want the hostages released.' — that was her message.

Those were her final words.

I can't help but go.

If I don't go, Moe and the others' lives will be in danger. The yakuza don't think twice about killing. Kikuyo said that they were experts at making people disappear. If anyone in the organisation is accused of a crime, arrested, indicted, and receives a prison sentence they earn praise and promotion.

These despicable people, that's practically the opposite of what normal people would think of a criminal.

But the blame here...

Is completely mine.

In order to buy time for Reki to escape, I had messed around with Leon in front of Kikuyo's eyes. I went into Hysteria Mode and that was a huge mistake.

Everything is my fault—and I shouldn't drag anyone else into it. Even my family that is living their everyday life.

I can't destroy it. Their peaceful, everyday life.

So I have to take care of it myself.

Reki's absence in taking care of Haimaki might just be a drop of happiness in a sea of misfortune.

But...

Reluctantly, I donned my bulletproof Butei High school uniform and holstered

my Beretta but— I'm still me, without the influence of Hysteria Mode.

What can the normal 'me' do?

In Kikuyo's main residence, the executives and their henchmen are sure to be there.

If can't fake Hysteria Mode because Kikuyo is used to seeing me in that state, and I won't be able to fool her sharp gaze.

If a fight broke out, even the normal 'me' can deal with a bunch of small-time thugs, but these are professionals.

...In the end, this won't be settled by talking.

Thinking that, I slipped out into the dark street without a word to anyone—a light snow had fallen.

White breath puffing, I hurried to Kikuyo's grand mansion in West Ikebukuro.

This has turned into an infiltration.

When crossing enemy's defensive lines, Butei call it an 'Infiltration'.

The word has its origin in the kind of circles Kikuyo runs in, and it's jargon for the disputes between rival families.

On full-alert, I peeked around the corner at a huge, extravagant Japanese style door...

"...Leon! Fujikibayashi! Asao...!"

Tattered and bloody, they were collapsed rather than leaning, against the side of a wall.

Panicked, I rushed over and knelt by them, and when I reached them... it was horrible.

The three of them had been pummeled mercilessly until their faces were monstrous.

It... doesn't look like they were able to put up any kind of a fight, and they were beaten and left here.

"Why did you fight them...? Against the yakuza...?"

As I hurriedly looked them over to make sure they didn't have any broken bones or ruptured organs...

"Ki...Kinji-san...sorry..."

With his nose broken and good looks spoiled, Fujikibayashi tried to apologise.

"E-even though we promised not to drag you into this... we ended up dragging you in anyway..."

T-that promise—

You did all of this in order to keep you promise to me?

You didn't have to keep that promise in this kind of emergency.

"You said that you wanted to pass the time going to school normally... So we tried to get Moe Mochizuki back from the Family to honour that promise so K-Kinji-san could live his life, but... we're s-sorry..."

Asao said weakly, his thick right arm was broken. That will take a month in order to recover.

...Because I tried and failed to forcibly make a normal life for myself at that school, these guys... tried to fix it themselves. Because I had said 'Don't drag me into it '.

Coughing violently and showering the snow with thin streaks of blood, Leon said—

"I-it's alright..!"

Alarmed, I turned toward him.

"I went in bare-handed. Because of our promise. I didn't pack any heat."

Despite his tattered and worn out appearance...Leon showed a boastful smile.

Wh-what the hell...!

What are you guys planning on doing? Keeping that promise to the letter?

They had done all of this **for me...!**

"Why did you fight... until something like this happened?! If you had given my

name, called for me... something like this would never have happened...!"

In my eyes, tears I couldn't explain began to well up.

"Fujikibayashi, Asao, Leon...! You don't owe me anything! We only fought and afterwards ate on the roof. There's nothing between us...!"

"-Not true!"

Despite his battered appearance, Leon put on a renewed face.

Fujikibayashi and Asao... laughed weakly.

"At school, everyone looked away from us. But you looked at me and Asao and faced us head-on"

"Ki-Kinji-san, you took us seriously... Heh Heh... That actually made us glad."

Fujikibayashi, Asao...!

"...So we just wanted to take your wishes seriously, that's all."

Leon...!

So that's it...!

The three of them... had been isolated and lonely.

Shunned and ignored at school and by society, they had nowhere to belong.

I understand how painful that can be. I've experienced it as well.

I faced them head-on, and even though it has only been a short while, it's like we have become friends.

They had done this for only that reason...

"B-but in the end, we... only managed to cause you trouble... Making you come out someplace like this... W-we're really sorry..."

"Hehe... Scum will always be scum, and that's us. A place like this is right for trash like us... Hehe..."

"People like us... you just shouldn't have anything to do with... People like us... The world looks at us like worms."

To Fujikibayash, Asao, and Leon I replied...

"They're wrong...!"

Rising, I glared at the entrance to the Kagataka Family's home.

"You fought. To help Moe, to help me. You fought fearlessly to help someone else. That's not something anyone can do!"

I don't know any words other than Butei words. So I spoke to them as if they were injured comrades.

"You aren't worms. You are human. Falling while fighting for someone else with all your might is something you should be proud of. It's human. And if anyone says anything different— They're asking for a beating...!"

It's me. I should be the one apologising.

I have power, and you, without power, fought my battle for me.

I can't let that go.

—A person carrying a gun, has a responsibility.

I'm ashamed that I had the nerve to say that to Leon on the rooftop that day.

Not just with guns.

Anyone who holds power has a responsibility.

A responsibility to fight for those without power.

I had made them my scapegoats... and I was too stupid to see it until now.

They made me realise this for the first time since leaving Butei High.

"—Kaname."

I raised my voice and addressed myself to the street corner behind me...

"Aha! You got me!"

Saying that, Kaname appeared in her school uniform and skipped toward me.

"Hello! I'm the cute little sister that takes care of her Onii-chan from 'Good Morning' until 'Good Night'."

She offered a phrase similar to something that Shirayuki would have said.

"You didn't think that you could tail a person on a snowy day, did you? Even

though you stepped in my footprints, I heard the sound of your footfalls."

"I knew that you had noticed me, but you didn't tell me to go away."

"If I had, you would have followed me anyway."

"I guess so. Hee hee!"

"But this is far enough. I'll make these yakuza pay each of us to settle this fight. They have only increased my determination to do so."

"Huh? Let me do something. I won't tell Reki, Third, or anyone."

"Well... You can get these three to a hospital for me. Also... Thanks for taking care of my Beretta"

"Thanks are illogical. That's what a little sister is supposed to do."

Saying that, Kaname winked at me in an adorable manner—

I was only half sure, but it seems that she was the one who serviced my gun so scrupulously.

Reki won't touch anyone else's gun without permission, G-3 treats his guns like toys, and Grandfather and Grandmother have always taught me: 'You should take care of your own things.'

So, by process of elimination I reached this conclusion: Kaname had been the one to service my gun. I owe her.

But now—

My present state of mind. Is that from my time at Butei High. I have the feeling that I have reverted.

Anger at the Kagataka Family is filling my chest, but I am still calm. Even though this situation occurred, rather than rage, my head is cool and collected.

The worrying thought of stepping into a life-and-death situation is merely a pleasant notion.

—I'm not a respectable person.

"But... Will you really be alright alone? It doesn't look like you are in HSS."

"I'll figure something out."

"Well... I believe in you."

Kaname and I had this conversation as she lent Leon a shoulder–

"Moe is inside, right?"

I asked Leon a question.

"Y-yeah..."

He nodded.

Let's go. The mission: save Moe. Number of enemies: Unknown. Their weapons: Unconfirmed. Forget King or Berserk, I wasn't even in normal Hysteria Mode, I was simply me. This job is going to be difficult.

But isn't it always? It's the sort of steep path that I'm used to walking.

"Good evening."

Despite it's old-fashioned design, the door was automatic and slid open...

Neatly dressed in her updated Kimono, Kikuyo greeted me.

"I'm sorry Tohyama. But it looks like I'm the type of girl that bothers the people I love."

"I'm not in the mood to listen to your jokes. Is it this way...?"

The snow had accumulated in the spacious Japanese garden, and walking through it we passed a koi pond with fish that must have cost several million yen apiece.

We entered the house's genkan.

As we walked I had seen a line of Ferraris in the garage, a huge Harley-Davidson motorbike, and a motorboat sitting on a trailer.

"Fu Fu! Your face, Tohyama, is lively like I thought."

Entering the genkan that was larger than my entire room, Kikuyo covered her mouth with the long sleeves of her kimono.

Thinking she has her prey caught in her web, she looks pleased with herself.

"Where's Moe?"

"Really now. You're already talking about another girl. This way. That girl really has a bad temper, don't you think?"

Whirling away in a huff, Kikuyo turned and started down a corridor. The walls of the corridor were an aquarium made of a huge tank embedded into the wall and had large fish swimming in it.

Following her down the hall, she led me into a room that was probably over 100 square metres.

"..."

The walls of the room were covered with amazing oil paintings, and off to the side of the support pillars there were celadon vases with the image of Asura, and a glass table with a lamp.

These treasure would have cost several million yen.

There wasn't even a trace of continuity in style, but the yakuza don't trouble themselves about such things. They hoard pieces of art in their mansions in case the police freeze their financial assets. Because real estate and art are assets that can be liquidated easily.

But these things are not what should be noticed. Instead, the yakuza scattered throughout the room should be observed.

First, the ones I know—the executives...

The lanky Todai Graduate was sitting on the sofa wearing a suit.

In addition, like dependant children that have yet to leave home, five yakuza wearing black suits were standing by the door—

Holding assault rifles.

Five AK-47's...?

That must have been hard to pull off.

Adopted by the former Soviet Union, they are now mass-produced in China—and it isn't the best gun.

Its accuracy is low, and it has design flaws. But putting that aside, it is an

assault rifle, and, of course, it can fire automatic bursts.

And despite the fact that its comparatively larger and more powerful 7.62 mm bullets reduces its loading capacity, it still carries more bullets than my pistol.

It's firepower is not something the normal me can deal with.

Although it also has the reputation of rusting easily and the rifling wearing down, it won't fail easily.

It is a weapon designed with War in mind, and a reliable gun.

"...Gunrunning?"

As a Butei, I foolishly pointed out the obvious.

Riko's would be easier to get into the country, but assault rifles— they would be a lot harder to get through inspection. One or two, I could understand, but a full set like this...

There's no way that they could be registered, and they have to come from the black market—**contraband guns**. All of them.

With connexions to China, Kikuyo has an easy route for gun smuggling—

"I just haven't gotten around to registering them yet."

Her silly answer implied I was correct.

"So they don't work?"

"Want to find out...?"[14](#)

The Todai Graduate burst into laughter at our exchange, as off to the side—

"...Tohyama-kun...!"

The executive that looked like a host pushed Moe ahead of him into the room.

"Moe...!"

I rushed over to her and saw that her two thumbs had been tied together behind her back. This is the simplest, but most effective way to immobilise someone's hands.

Perhaps because she was so flustered, but Moe crashed into me and fell in a

heap—

"They haven't done anything bad to you, have they?"

I asked, bending down on one knee to meet her eyes and calm her.

"N-no...They haven't done anything to me, but..."

Suddenly she looked angry.

"Fujikibayashi and the rest are at a hospital. They'll be fine. They aren't going to die."

At my words, Moe's face became calm again...Kikuyo said 'Of course they are!', sulkily pouting.

"—Kikuyo, you have illegally detained a minor; that's kidnapping."

"What if we were just playing with a string and she got tangled in it?"

Now that we had come to the crux of the issue—I turned and glared angrily at Kikuyo.

"W-well... she started it by grabbing ahold of me...!"

Because she did not want me to hate her, Kikuyo bowed her head, looked up, and began explaining.

"We were in a coffee shop chatting, and I might have exaggerated our relationship a little... and she starts yelling 'Liar! Liar! Liar! Liaaaaar!'. In front of my own people!"

Kikuyo explained as Moe shot an angry glare in her direction.

"T-That's because you started to say all th-those perverted things!"

..W-what?

Kikuyo, just what did you tell Moe?

"—Some of it was true. It happened a long time ago, but still..."

Kikuyo puffed out her flat chest—

Moe paled instantly... Ahhh... and turned toward me...

In reality, it was a long time ago when Kikuyo and a group of girls trapped me

in the school infirmary, or the science lab and made me go into Hysteria Mode... I-I couldn't help but look away.

Whereupon Moe turned back to glare at Kikuyo.

She looked like she wanted to launch herself at Kikuyo again—the Evil Boss Woman.

I didn't know Moe could be so... s-scary.

There seems to be something other than a personal grudge between the two of them. And it clearly involves me.

I can only feel increasingly responsible for the whole situation...

But as I thought about it—

Creak!

The Todai Graduate stood up from the sofa.

He ordered: 'Tie them up'... and this time Moe and my hands were tied behind us with a longer cord. Smiling, the Host took my gun and knife.

Of course it's as I thought, and they won't just let me go.

Up til now, everything had gone as I had expected, and now—I'll be negotiating with Kikuyo.

I still have something she wants. Myself.

Kikuyo grabbed Moe, but she really was interested in me.

Kikuyo must want me to do something for her, and now we've come to the part where I listen to her demands...

"Miss, are you carrying a gun?"

The Todai Graduate asked Kikuyo.

"Hm? No."

She answered, and suddenly behind her—

Whoosh!

The Host grabbed her.

"—!?"

Furrowing her eyebrows, Kikuyo looked around, and the Todai Graduate was smiling wickedly.

Then the yakuza-tied Kikuyo's hands like ours as she looked around her.

With a *Thud!* Kikuyo was forced to sit down next to me.

"Y-You...!"

Finally, the Todai Graduate and Host broke into a laugh as she glared. Hair falling across her face, she was unable to brush it away.

"Sorry Miss. You haven't been the Boss ever since you brought that boy here."

—A coup d'etat...!?

Th...this is bad! I didn't count on something like this happening. With this, the possibility of negotiating a release with Kikuyo is gone.

"Don't say you didn't know! A girl, a brat as the Boss... How much they laughed at us! Ah... How hard it has been for all of us!"

"But now then, Miss, you haven't been totally useless. Because of you the police didn't take us so seriously... You predecessor was a powerful man. As his daughter you even got a lot of the old jobs. But we don't need those anymore."

The Todai Graduate lit a cigar and blew the smoke into Kikuyo's face.

"We've got a profitable connexion to China now."

"And you were the one who did all the hard work for us!"

They roared with laughter—but it wasn't just them. All of the executives must approve of this rebellion.

Or maybe **they were forced**, if they didn't.

If I think back... all the signs were there...

Even at that restaurant in Sengoku, Ruby—I felt the tension in the room.

Neither the Todai Graduate whose cigar she threw water on, or the Host who she made put away his kiseru [15](#)—didn't show even the slightest hint of anger. They simply **complied**. As if they were hiding something.

Even when she ordered them to leave the two of us alone... everyone left quickly without an argument.

Just now, I was only concerned with assessing the possibility of physical attack and didn't give thought to the potential danger to Kikuyo.

I let my guard down. Even though I am a professional. I missed it.

In other words... I'm not the most important thing to them here. Kikuyo is.

They had planned better than I had.

"And finally, Miss... even though it was on a whim, you lured in this dangerous boy—Tohyama-kun. If it were just us, we wouldn't have been able to capture him. Yes, Master Kou will be pleased!"

That's what the Chinese wanted—me to fight for them.

"Kinji Tohyama-ku~n. You know what this means~? After this, you're going to be sold to the Hong Kong Mafia! You can brag to your friends that you went for a lot!"

Back when I was eating with Kikuyo, my Hysteria Mode was fixed on Kikuyo, a woman, so I—

Didn't notice their suspicious action at Ruby.

I neglected what I should have guarded against...and now I'm reaping what I sowed...

What the heck was I doing!?

In trying to become a normal person, I only caused honest people trouble...!

"And because Japan has such an Omake¹⁶ culture, we'll include **you two** pretty things free."

"Before that, we'll take our time and have our fun with you, Miss."

The Host said licking his lips with his pierced tongue... Kikyo...

...turned away... and sniffled...

... and began to cry.

Drip! *Drip!* Large tears fell to the floor.

She looked like a normal girl.

I can't say that she doesn't have her faults, but... I feel sorry for her.

But what should I do now?

No matter where I look, I'm in a tough spot.

Should I cooperate with them and go to Hong Kong on the condition that they let the 'free bonuses' go?

Just then—

"Oi, Aniki!"

A **disembodied voice** resounded through the room.

The yakuza all startled to attention, and the executives and members started looking all around the room. I looked up and around the room as well.

"I-I didn't know you were there, G-3! So you followed me again!?"

I said to the owner of the voice.

"Aniki, you were only focused on Kaname. You have to consider that you might have a double-tail!"

Still invisible, G-3 replied somewhat peeved—

Snatch!

And he picked up the **wide-eyed Kikuyo** who still sobbing loudly.

It looked like Kikuyo has suddenly risen into the air.

She floated through the air at a walking pace...

The yakuza and Moe were only able to stare at Kikuyo, completely dumbfounded.

"How did you follow me, anyway. For later reference."

"I walked on top of power lines."

"I won't be able to use that at all... and why did you take care of Kikuyo first?"

As I spoke to my invisible younger brother, G-3—

Was already cutting the cords around my wrists.

I'm free to move. For now.

"Because this is **pretty**. Take it off. It's a little cold, and my Aniki wants to get moving."

Saying that—

G-3 carried Kikuyo to the window, cut the cords binding her, and took the obi of her kimono...

...W-why are you untying it?

There was a rustle of clothing.

"H-Hey...what are you doing... N-no...!"

Blushing with an embarrassed red, in the middle of the air— Kikuyo left behind her modern-style kimono— —

Falling, she turned round and round like a scroll. And f-from her direction...!

"Kyaaaaaa...!"

"...Waah!"

With a *Thud!*, Kikuyo fell on top of me.

It was a deep red, expensive embroidered transparent kind—

It was surprised by how adult-like it was and how little the fabric of the lingerie covered.

My heart almost burst in surprise at the sight.

— *Thump!* —

But I have a very strong heart.

And Kikuyo knows it, so I don't want to think about why she wore that today—

To me, lingerie is a weapon. And I'm weak against red.

And white.

And black.



In addition to these three colours, I have recently found out that I am weak

against yellow.

...Now that I think about it, it's any colour.

Have I no shame?

"N-No~...!"

Some aerial version of the classic 'Wicked Magistrate and the Town Girl'¹⁷ had taken place, leaving her in her underwear, Kikuyo covered her body and chest with her hands, trying to cover the important bits.

But there's no way you can cover your whole body with only your hands.

"Huh? Thank goodness... the cords have been cut. And yours too Tohyama-kun!"

Because Moe could not read the situation and blurted that out, I can't pretend not to move any longer.

I stood up–

Bzzzz! *Bzzzz!*

With the sound of flickering lights... G-3 materialised... How should I respond to this...!

"This is quality Nishijin weave¹⁸. Look at it, Aniki! This is some kind of amazing marigold pattern, don't you think?"

Photo-refractive Camouflage de-activated, G-3 was sporting Kikuyo's **pretty** kimono, an innocent smile on his face...

Wearing his sunglasses-like HMD, and on top of his usual armour he was wearing the coat that Leon and the rest of them had given to me.

Come to speak of it, that coat seems to suit him.

Well just for today... I can forgive you. Wear it and fight.

What happens from now on will be like revenge for what they did to Leon and the rest of them, so go wild.

Kikuyo could only watch G-3 and the men that had until now been her henchmen.

Her shoulders began trembling, so I...

"...Kikuyo, I was right about what I said before, wasn't I?"

I smiled while softly re-arranging her dishevelled hair.

"You can't trust the yakuza."

I gave her a wink and... she blushed red, but seemed to **understand**.

I have become your Hero of Justice.

The yakuza finally turned their attention back to me and,

"Youu...!" "Brat...!" "Which family do you belong to...!?"

-*Bang!* *Bang!* *Bang!* *Bang!* *Bang!* *Bang!*

Pointing at G-3, a thunderous roar spouted from the assault rifles, but...

Cla-cla-clang! *Cla-clang!*

The bullets could not penetrate his jet-black armour. On his side...

Thrum! *Ching!*

Using 'Coil' — a technique similar to my 'Tornado' — reversed the AK-47 bullets, intercepting them one after another. Precisely diverting them to strike the base of the trigger and magazine stock, he rendered them unusable.

Bullets, G-3 can deal with.

Assault rifles too.

Precisely diverting them to strike the base of the trigger and magazine stock, he rendered them unusable.

"You've **changed**, G-3!"

"It'd be rude not to! There's Renoir, Jingdezhen pottery, Tankei, and Emile Galle!"

G-3 said, smiling as he pointed out the painting, vases, buddha, and lamp in the room.

Smashing through the door and the surrounding wall, I saw him come through the window and drop into the garden.

But he has seen the artwork in the room and changed. We are both carriers of this un-manageable condition.

"You changed for that girl, Aniki?"

"Yeah. It was kind of like fire being applied to an old ember"

I said...

While protecting Kikuyo and Moe, I led them into the garden, away from the room that was filled with the smell of gunpowder.

Snow had fallen, and I searched for a way out of the garden—there's a gate.

First things first, I have to get the girls away from her.

"—You guys are mafia. Don't tell me that's all you got. C'mout and fight! Just like my Aniki, I won't kill you!"

Tossing Kikuyo's clothes over a pine branch, G-3 began indulging his hobby of hunting criminals around the world.

As I thought when we first met, my younger brother's speech is rough.

In which case, how are the yakuza supposed to understand him?

Starting tomorrow, I'm going to make him start a Japanese language course.

"K-Kill them! There's only two!"

Even though he graduated from Todai, he didn't seem to have learned his lesson, and as the lanky executive shouted to his henchmen...

Rumble! *Rumble!*

Like the final showdown of a samurai film, they just kept streaming out. On the whole, they all looked fierce.

Holding shotguns and machine guns in their hands— 50 men entered the garden.

I could tell from how they positioned themselves that they were not very well-trained, but there were a lot of them.

I already have my hands full trying to protect Kikuyo and Moe.

It can't be helped.

Just then I noticed that we had **one more ally**— I need their help.

With the noise of G-3's one-sided war on the yakuza behind me, I...

"...Uh, we're in a tight spot. But Moe, Kikuyo. You see that star over there. Please pray and ask 'Please help me.'"

Smiling, I hugged Moe and Kikuyo's shoulders with both arms—

Both my cheeks pressed close to theirs.

I pointed out a single star glimmering in the sky.

"Because beautiful girls' prayers are able to reach the stars."

"—!?"

"—!?"

Although they have different personalities, they are both girls with a girl's heart.

To each one of them I whispered "Come on." and "Pray." respectively.

Poooof!

They each blushed red.

Even here, even now.

Haha! They are cute, aren't they.

"....S-Star...Help...! Please help Tohyama-kun, n-no matter what happens to me."

As she said her prayer, I glanced at Moe by accident.

As I am now, I understand. Part of you is a schemer.

But in the future, I don't want you to develop that part of yourself too much. I'm weak against such womanly wiles.

"M-me too... whatever happens to me is fine. B-but Tohyama...help him. S-Star...? Star...!"

Kikuyo said as if competing with Moe.

I must have misunderstood. I thought you were a mature girl, but—

You did grow up with a complicated home-life, and it was all just a mask.

Squeezing their eyes tightly shut as they prayed, I saw their faces in profile and got the sense that they were young and innocent.

Then, I noticed that the star I had pointed out began steadily coming closer.

"Now then, the star-goddess—Quadra is coming!"

Wha? Even as I spoke it I heard it.

"Stupid Kinji~!!!"

That anime-like goddess' voice. Even this far away, she saw us.

—Aria.

What I had pointed out was not a star, but an invention created by Aya Hiraga-san... a Hover Skirt—a flight unit in which Aria H. Kanzaki now soared.

Aaaah. In the end, it looks like my escape plan has been discovered.

Carrying her trademark pair of Governments, and with the full moon behind her, Aria—

"I've missed you, Kinji...*Grind!* *Grind!*

Grinding her canines, she glared down at me with her camelia coloured eyes.

"You missed me? What a coincidence!"

"What do you mean by that!"

"I've missed you too, Aria."

But before I could wink at her...

Bam! *Bam!* *Bam!* *Bam!*

Peppered the spacious garden from the air with her Government's, her golden shell casings littered the snow.

Her angry .45 ACP bullets knocked the guns out of the yakuza's hands who had pointed them toward the sky.

As expected of someone who studied at the Butei Institute in Rome. She is experienced with anti-Mafia tactics.

Nimbly dodging her enemies' bullets mid-air, she skillfully destroyed their shotguns, assault rifles, sub-machineguns, and other weapons in order of greatest threat first.

Whirling in the sky, and sometimes crossing both her arms, Aria fired non-stop destroying the enemies' firepower. Twirling her guns around her fingers, she stowed her pistols in the space provided inside her Hover Skirt—and storing them in the holsters beneath her skirt, she descended with her two swords drawn.

She cast an angry look at me with my arms around Moe and Kikuyo.

"Now then, Aria. Who was it that told you?"

"An anonymous phone call, but the agent who read it seemed to be reading a pre-written message."

So the person who told on me...

They like to plan things in minute detail, huh?

Yes, but who was it?

"Speaking of you, Kinji, what have you been doing!"

"Just a little social field trip."

"Social field trip... huh?"

An astonished look on her face, Aria looked around at the yakuza surrounding us.

"So you've been a normal civilian this whole time?"

"That's right."

"So does that mean you got yourself a normal girlfriend?."

Suddenly very angry for some reason, Aria turned a murderous glare toward Moe and Kikuyo-

Letting go of them, I raised both my hands in the air in the western gesture meaning: "Oh well...".

"—If I did something like that, wouldn't that leave you all alone?"

Hearing me say that, Aria made some incomprehensible noises of "Hu-Whah!".

She also used here super-blush technique, and started flailing her arms in denial, and dropped her swords.

I caught them, and helped her grasp them firmly—

"A-anyway! G-3! It looks like he's on your side. What is this!?"

Ah, she avoided the subject. And my line of sight.

"It's complicated, but for now we're working together..."

I explained—

Aria said "Hmm..." and in typical Aria fashion, accepted my brash younger brother as an ally.

"Well, there are a lot of them, so let's finish cleaning up. This is getting interesting!"

With those belligerent words... Aria paused with an "Oh!" like she had just remembered something and looked up at me.

"Kinji. We'll talk about your fee later. It's a Butei's job to protect **innocent civilians**, anyway."

In spite of everything, you're still happy to see me, Aria—

—Sliding another magazine into her guns, she gave a wink and turned back to the fray.

It was the kind of wink you could admire for an hour.

"But for old time's sake, I'll cut you a deal."

Feeling sorry, I made G-3 return the kimono he had taken, and took Moe and Kikuyo to shelter on the other side of the gate—

Although the level of danger posed by the enemies was low, still in Hysteria Mode, I returned to the garden to protect Aria.

But G-3 and Aria had taken care of almost all of the yakuza already.

They were in a pitiful state and I smiled at them as Aria was tying their legs together with some cable as their destroyed guns and bent or broken blades littered the garden.

In front of the mansion...

Next to the Todai Graduate that had fallen foaming at the mouth was the Host who had apparently been hiding until now....

"W-who the heck are you...! I-I'm the second in command here! Don't you know what that means!"

Knees knocking together, he stood shakily, threatening Aria and G-3.

With what he had taken from me— my own gun.

But they were far from intimidated.

"That's your Beretta, isn't it? Why did you let him take it from you?"

"I didn't want to wreck it. Because you're poor after all."]

They both had a look on their face that said 'I've got this' as they spoke to me.

G-3 was so relaxed that he started cleaning out his ears with a pinky.

"Get back—! I won't kill you, but get back!!!!"]

The Host screamed incoherently...

He started waving the gun around without locking on to a specific target.

Aria and G-3 at least seem to understand— it would be bad if I were shot,

"Sure. We'll leave. As soon as you return what you've borrowed."

Not wanting to lose my gun, I made this compromise and walked toward the Host— then it happened.

...I sensed that something bad happened behind me. I turned back.

Moe and Kikuyo were there.

What the...?

Then as if answering my own question—

"—D-Don't shoot Tohyama-kun!"

She had worked her way around the garden and stepped out of shadow of the shrubs.

In her hands...

...a gun...

An automatic pistol.

A Browning Hi-Power.

A Belgian made pistol. Sturdy, but relatively light-weight. But most of all it had a double-sized magazine and a slim grip that made it easy for Asian hands to hold. In Japan, it is a popular weapon for women.

Moe... her hands are quivering and her stance is bad.

But she could still shoot because the safety has been taken off.

It must be Kikuyo's. She must have hidden it somewhere in the garden.

Panicking, the Host aimed his gun at Moe...

"That girl is a bona fide civilian. Don't you dare point your gun at her! The Family doesn't hurt civilians. Have you forgotten that?"

Saying that, Kikuyo—

Kicking up snow with each step, walked up behind me.

Then standing in front of me blocking my left side and spread her empty hands.

"If you want to shoot someone, shoot me. That should make Master Kou happy."

"Stop it...Moe...Kikuyo! Why didn't you run!?"

I shouted at them...

"B-Because I wanted to do something like that pink-haired girl too... to protect you!"

Giving Aria a jealous glance, she gripped the gun in both hands.

The second half of Reki's proverb came to mind—'A dog cannot become a wolf'—like a flash-back.

Stop Moe! Don't pull that trigger. You are just like that collie of yours, a good dog. Don't cross over into this world of wolves— especially not for my sake.

You're just a girl. You couldn't survive in that world. So don't shoot. You mustn't shoot...!

"—This is my fault, Tohyama. The Chinese are not so forgiving. These idiots are going to want to make excuses for everything that has happened, and they need a scapegoat to hang it on their neck."

"...Kikuyo..."

"So, Tohyama. Moe isn't the only one that wants to protect you, I do too. Even though all I've ever caused you was trouble, you still protected me... That made me happy. So I— I want to be your Hero, and repay what I owe to you."

With her back facing me, Kikuyo's voice is calm. The voice of someone ready to die.

Kikuyo... wants to die in order to apologise to me. For all the times she has used me—from middle school until now.

Moe. Kikuyo. You are both facing very different sorts of crisis—

"Kikuyoooo! ...Damn youuu!"

Judging that the likelihood of Moe's bullet hitting him was low, the Host turned the Beretta gun toward Kikuyo.

Lining up the bead in the rear sights, he took aim at her head.

Are you... really going to shoot an unarmed girl? The very one who provided for you until now...!?

"...!"

This is—

A multiple-line-of-fire scenario.

A difficult situation when multiple with guns have several people in their line of fire making it difficult to make a move.

Following the ironclad rule in such a case, Aria and G-3 froze.

But this executive will shoot Kikuyo. We only have a few seconds left.

"—Raaaaaaaaa!"

The Host screamed and began to pull the trigger.

What should I do? How can I stop this...!?

Right now, I don't have a gun or a knife. It's too late for me to shield Kikuyo with my own body.

I began racking my brain, poring over all my experiences looking for a solution, and then—

Immediately, I blinked the signal 'B' for Browning to G-3.

And in no more time than it took to blink an eye, I gave Aria a look that said 'I believe in you' and in the next moment, almost simultaneously—

Bam! *Bam!* *Bam!* *Bam!* *Bam!*

From each direction, 5 guns flashed.

The Host's gun roared, and in reflexive response, Moe pulled the trigger of her Browning. Aria's silver and black Governments fired, and G-3 shot an Invisible Bullet from his HK USP.

At that instant, My world began moving in slow-motion—

Beginning with the one furthest away, Moe's bullet that was headed toward the Host's stomach was intercepted by G-3 Cracker... what I call Billiard, and deflected.

Next, Aria's twin bullets pierced first the Host's and Moe's sleeves... grazing both their hands, and cleverly causing them to drop their guns.

Then I saw the red-hot 9mm Parabellum bullet getting closer.

His aim was good. As it is, the bullet will strike Kikuyo in the forehead dead-centre.

—*Gasp!*...

Kikuyo is on my left side—shielding my heart.

In such a position, I can't just push her out of the way with my left arm.

In that split-second, I only moved my empty right hand.

I can't just reach past Kikuyo's shoulder and deflect the bullet with one hand.

I could only slightly alter its trajectory, and it would hit her in the eye.

In this position executing Tornado would be impossible.

I can't protect her with any technique I have used before now.

So I–

In order to protect her, I hugged Kikuyo close with my left arm and with my right–!

"..."

Everything around me–

Became silent.

Everyone was staring at me with a look of shock.

The Host and Moe who had dropped their guns, and Aria and G-3 who had already fired.

Kikuyo had closed her eyes at the last minute in order to meet death... realising that my left arm had pulled her close, with a start, she looked up at my face from point-blank range.

"..."

I did it.

In my heart, I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to pull it off in time.

Doing something like this, it's not like that time with Riko, but I've become a superhuman. Goodbye humanity.

And this time... there are a lot of witnesses.

I had to laugh at myself...

"–Hot! This bullet is hot!"

I caught the bullet, and dropped it in the snow at my feet.

In principle, the technique is simple.

In a short period of time, I **match the speed** of the bullet with my arm... Then catch it.

I got the idea from my Grandfather catching flies with his chopsticks and reduced the energy of the bullet to zero.

It's a technique that requires the whole body to move the arm together in a direction opposite of Ouka, stopping the bullet and its rotation with Kitsuka.

And since the arm is moving supersonically, the amount of force transferred from the bullet to the hand is reduced.

At most, it will be moving at 100 kph, not faster than baseball pitcher can throw a ball, and so catching the 8 g bullet is not much different.

As for generating the energy in the arm movement... I copied what I saw my Grandmother do with Clear Fall Water, and used it in reverse to cancel out the force of the bullet. So, there are traces of slippage by my feet where I pushed back.

As a result—

At a glance though, it should look like I just raised my arm and caught the speeding bullet.

Of course Kikuyo and I are unharmed.

The heat of the combusted gunpowder burnt the palm of my hand.

But, hey, getting away with a blister is nothing.

"That's something even I've never done!"

With a little one inch punch, G-3 sent the Host flying into the next room, recovered my Beretta, and returned it to me.

"That was my first time as well."

G-3, who couldn't shoot a woman, dealt with the Browning's bullet... With her twin guns, Aria took care of the rest. They both made a snap decision.

As always, Aria never fails to surprise. She must have guessed my intent from the direction G-3 pointed his gun. As expected of Holmes the 4th.

"How did you do it, Aniki? Can I shoot you now? If I saw it again, I'm sure I'd be able to do it, then you can shoot me!"

"I'm not going to play 'catch' with you."

—Guns... are like women.

Or so the adult Butei say. If you don't bond with them they'll sulk and get into a bad state.

Everyday, I have been running away from fights, neglecting my Beretta. Careless of how well it had served me.

So... This was my girl's revenge, huh?

I gave a wry smile as I returned my gun to its holster.

But Beretta mine. I understand your anger about how I have treated you. Forgive me.

What kind of a host have I been? But I will never neglect you again.

While thinking those very Host-esque thoughts, to the guy who has to soothe even his own gun in Hysteria mode, Aria said...

"That face. In the short time that I haven't seen you... have you grown up a bit?"

I had to laugh at the Gun-girl who came up to me, and who seemed to speak for my Beretta.

That was an insightful question... Aria seems to understand.

Here, outside of Butei High...

They made me realise what kind of person I am. Embarrassed at how clueless I had been I said:

"By the way, Aria, my parent's house is nearby. If you want, we can go back there and I can introduce you to my family—"

I gave a light-hearted rebuttal...

I don't know what she thought, but she gave a short "Eh!" and hurried to stand much straighter than necessary. She hastily began straightening her

bangs.

"—Maybe later. We can't exactly call this matter settled."

Looking toward Kikuyo's mansion...

We couldn't see it from where we were standing, but we looked up toward where the roof should be.

—**It's there.**

And this time, it's higher—**the real deal.**

Until now, they had been able to conceal their presence well, but as things settled down over here... the signs became much more noticeable.

G-3 had noticed it as well, and we all turned to face the same way. He'll follow us regardless.

"Aria, the two girls... get Moe and Kikuyo to a safe place. Apparently, I'm so irresistible that I would only lure them back here."

"Hmm... Moe and Kikuyo, is it? Alright then, but afterwards you have some questions to answer. Th-then we'll go to your house. S-so that you can introduce me properly. I'll put it in my planner. We'll go for real."

From the strange look on her face, I couldn't tell if she was mad or happy—

"T-Tohyama-kun... W-why did you do such a dangerous thing...?"

"T-Tohyama..."

Trembling as she walked, Moe was taking care of Kikuyo who was still in shock.

Aria is a woman as well. She wouldn't actually hurt them.

I answered Moe's question bluntly.

"Because I want to give those cowardly little birdies a little surprise."

I told her in a whisper, concealing the truth a little...

Then I faced them with more serious expression.

"Now is the time for all good girls to head home. I don't want to see you pick up a gun again either. Your hands are too beautiful to be holding such a thing."

But the hands of a goddess are beautiful as well."

I answered Moe—embedding a hidden message for Aria.

How was that? Understand me?

Goddess? At that word a question mark appeared on Aria's face, and I turned a smile toward her—

"Oi Aniki! That's enough. They're laughing at you over there."

Still looking toward the rooftop, G-3 raised a angry voice.

Standing next to my little brother who apparently wanted more attention...

After checking to see that Aria and the girls had made it to safety, we headed up to the roof—



To the **real enemies** on the roof I said:

"You're there right? You want to play?"

After a short silence...

"–Shi.." [20](#)

Chinese?

So, I thought. But from their answer, it seems they understand Japanese.

"It appears that you were interested in me, but I have absolutely no desire to have anything to do with you."

There was no answer to my demand.

It would be a problem if they showed up at my house or at school after this.

So I will blow them off right here.

"Let's go G-3."

"Yeah– We'll make make 'em realise they don't want to mess with us!"

Now that I had officially asked for his help, G-3 looked happy.

Returning to the Mansion grounds, we entered a room with Chinese decor that had apparently been prepared for them...

There were signs that someone had eaten peaches and bananas and there was leftover liver.

Judging from the table setting, there are three of them.

Using the ladder, G-3 and I climbed to the roof–

With the melting snow under the moonlight, we came out onto a large tiled roof.

As I had predicted– there were three of them.

"..."

Two of them I recognised.

The first, I could hardly forget, Coco.

She was the first that Reki and I had crossed paths with, and her sisters Paonyan and Juju.

They were supposed to be sentenced to confinement in Nagano Prison. Did she escape alone?

But I don't recall any of them wearing glasses.

A black-haired version of Aria, she looked a little cute in her Qing Dynasty dress, but standing next to Coco...

"I'm delighted to have met you again, Kinji Tohyama-san. G-3-san."

The thin figure with round glasses bowed a respectful greeting to us. I remember him too.

He wore a plastered smile, and below his rounded glasses it was impossible to tell if his thinly slitted eyes were open or closed.

He wore the classically spectacular embroidered clothes of an Imperial Han court civil official.

He is the ambassador from, Rampan that showed us the day we met on Empty Island for 'Bandire'...

I'm sure it's him, Seigen Shokatsu.

Kikuyo's connexion to a major Chinese player—was Rampan. The world really is a small place after all...

...but,

That's someone I don't want to mess with...

Furrowing my eyebrows—I regarded the third person present for the first time.

With straight black hair that reached almost down to her feet, I saw a girl who appeared to be a 5th year Primary schoolgirl.

Wearing a cutoff Nagoya Butei Girl's school sailor suit—The girls at that school boast 'I will never be shot' so they wear a special uniform that has been trimmed short everywhere.

The inseams and chest seams are only 1 cm long. Forget her navel, this outrageous uniform leaves her entire abdomen exposed.

A gentle night wind ruffled her clothes, and it is obvious that she isn't wearing any underwear underneath so that 1-3 cm of her bare breasts were fleeting

exposed. Her slender tanned arms showed from inside her short sleeves.

But from this person that I don't want to mess with... It's not because of her overly exposed state.

The incident in the bath with Tamamo proved that, and I'm not a Lolicon either.

—I sensed something by instinct.

She is not human.

Only something that has taken the form of a girl. Like Tamamo.

Also... there's the thin orange tail.

Her crimson-coloured eyes permanently opened wide, she wore a blank expression on her face. But it wasn't the same kind of expressionless look as Reki. It was a look that inspired an impression of ethereal omniscience.

In comparison to the seemingly endless feeling of perception...

I don't sense any murderous intent. She is simply standing there, observing.

With G-3 and I in Hysteria Mode, we could easily take care of her.

"Hmph... So that brat is Rampan's rep for Far East Warfare, huh?"

G-3 must have noticed the girl as well.

We have both been drawn into the dark side of the international conflict— Far East Warfare.

In order to prevent an all-out war and large-scale destruction, rules were established that battles between the strongest representatives from each of the involved parties would settle the matter.

"Yes, that is correct, but..."

No sooner did Shokatsu's reply confirm that she was Rampan's representative than—

Crunch! *Crunch!*

"I've switched from 'Neutral' to 'DEEN'. So I have a reason to fight you!"

Crushing roof tiles underfoot, G-3 advanced.

He's wanted to fight since the beginning and that's why he followed me–

"H-halt Tohyama! Dost thou want to fight a Buddha!"

The quivering voice came from inside my shirt.

It was Tamamo's voice coming from the charm hanging around my neck that she had transformed herself into.

I stopped and stood still.

"What exactly would I be fighting?"

"T-that form is Kou. She is on par with the Japanese Fenghuang²¹, chief among the shapeshifters. In India, canonised as The Fighting Buddha, the genuine..."

"I don't see any of that. You have to be mistaken."

Tamamo is always nervous whenever we face off with a mysterious enemy.

So I started moving forward again.

"What you are planning almost amounts to an insurrection! You would make every shapeshifter in China your enemy!"

Because she was being noisy, I took out the charm to throw it away, but with a *Poof!* Tamamo materialised clinging to my legs.

"–Against Kou, guns and blades have no effect! Halt, both of you!"

Because Tamamo was so desperately frantic, I stopped, but cutting across in front of me–

"Ha Ha! Guns? Blades? I've never counted on any of those things! We use our supersonic fists!"

Still laughing, G3 clenched his right fist... *Intimidate!*

Lowering his posture G-3 set his feet in the stance for 'Meteor'– his version of my 'Ouka'.

He was facing Kou, and Tamamo called out to Rampan's warrior.

–At this point, G-3 will win.

That's how I see it.

But what...? Coco and Shokatsu are looking somewhat flustered.

"It's alright if I kill a pagan god!"

As a Christian, G-3 spoke angrily as if carrying out one of the Church's threats... and advanced on his enemy Kou... but above him... Wh-what is that?

Small specks of golden light appeared.

Their number steadily increased.

Swirling around, they formed a golden ring about 20 cm across.

That floating ring of light reminds me of the paintings of religious icons, angels, and gods—

"G-Golden Ring Crown²²...! –Kou! I implore you to stop!"

Tamamo shrieked.

In the very next instant...

Flash!

" –!?"

The area was bathed in red light.

But there was no sound.

From Kou's eye, a line of laser light flashed out and struck G-3 in the chest.

It had all taken a tenth of a second.

"...!?"

And with just that—

G-3 crumpled on the spot without a sound.

His eyes wide in shock, G-3 had the expression of someone who hadn't the slightest clue of what had happened.

Then his pupils dilated...!

From his mouth... blood came...! From the amount streaming out, I could tell at a glance that it was fatal.

"G-G-3!"

What just happened...!

It was only some kind of light.

Did something hit you? No that wasn't it.

Bullets bounce off of your scientifically engineered armour like popcorn.

"–Ru raada fuoru, oru?"

Kou tilted her head–

And began mumbling in some unintelligible language. Red light in her eye, she turned to face me.

Coco and Shokatsu seemed to be dumb-struck by the spectacle.

Rampan itself– can't even control this mysterious girl.

Even though I was in Hysteria Mode, it took me several seconds to understand what had happened.

"We must flee, Tohyama! We cannot help G-3! That was the Compliant Rod²³... A laser beam! Even I cannot ward against it!"

–A laser...!?

That's impossible! That's what Kou shot from her eye!? And I couldn't even pick up on her bloodlust...!

An attack at the speed of light.

And even if I could have predicted her, even a knife wielded at the speed of sound would not have worked. There is absolutely no way to defend against it!

G-3 and I could only take on enemies with bullets that moved at the speed of sound.

"W-What the hell...? She's...!"

I want to immediately rush to G-3's aid, but I can't move forward.

Kou's red eye is now **fixed on me**.

Tamamo bared her canines and shrieked at me:

"–I told you! Kou is the Fighting Buddha–**Sun Wukong!**"

Go For The NEXT!!!

Afterword

Hello! Thanks for waiting! I am the person who has happily written, of course, the novel, the side stories, and the source material for the manga and 4-Koma–Akamatsu. Right now the 12th volume of the 'Hidan no Aria' novel, 6th of the 'Hidan no Aria' manga, 4th of 'Hidan no Aria AA' and the 4-Koma are all for sale at the same time! It's an Aria Festival! I'm not an author that just writes, but I also read and enjoy the story too. I was so excited and entertained that it awakened some new kind of Hysteria Mode! Fuooooo! Now for the Q&A corner!

Q: Akamatsu-sensei, of all the characters, which one do you like best?

This question was not asked by one, but several readers. This question might be the number one questions authors are asked. Thank-you for the question! And the answer is–'I love all my characters equally!'

I think this is the best possible answer, as it won't hurt any character's feelings. But I think that such an answer might disappoint some of my readers. So if forced, I'd say 'Takachiho Urara' is my favorite. Huh!! Who's that!?– You might be thinking. She's introduced in the beginning Author's notes of the AA manga, you should read it! The 3rd volume is coming out soon!

Takachiho is, what we would call AN Ojou-sama– a high-handed beauty. A first-year student at Butei Institute, and Aria's Kouhai. She uses the Ruger Super RedHawk with .454 calibre bullets and is a good shot. She is beautiful enough to be recruited by CVR and she has many other good points... but she is very proud, has a hard time making friends, and tries to solve problems with the power of money. I love writing characters with many good points and flaws. Even though I'm the one writing them, I think it's fun and awfully human to wonder how they will grow. As a matter of fact, she has already appeared in the original novels, so please look for her!

Well, Hidan no Aria has finally reached it's 12th volume. In this volume, Kinji—like all the characters— have grown little-by-little, and if my readers so too, that would make me very happy!

A certain day in May 2012

Akamatsu Chuugaku

1. Made-up word meaning demon-banish-boundary.

2. The meaning here is that Kinji thinks he, or his Hysteria Mode is the issue, and he can't exorcise or get rid of part of himself.

3. The words here are 'Scarlet miko' and 'Azure miko', obviously referring to Shirayuki and Reki, respectively

4. Rumiko and Rimiko have to do with similar blue-green colours (Japanese often makes no distinction between blue and green). Maybe Reki has an evil twin!! Haha!

5. Sushi wrapped in fried tofu

6. Word refers to a style of delinquents popular in to 70 and 80's. No relation to American yankees.

7. A Japanese fast food chain.

8. Kind of long coat with writing on the back worn by bosozoku and yankee delinquents.

9. The original phrase is a saying of Buddha. The original intent was that of humility because Buddha recognised that he was connected to all life, thus he was everything. It is mistakenly used as an egotistical statement of superiority by some.

10. About 57 Euro, 50 British Pounds, and 63 USD.

11. About 243 Euro, 213 British Pounds, and 270 USD.

12. An erotic novel publishing house.

13. Ending theme for a TV series about fictional Tohyama Kin— an Edo period

samurai and administrator that helped the common people.

14. In Japan, gun laws are crazy strict. It is almost impossible to own a gun other than a hunting rifle. The only exception to this rule are old guns for collectors. The stipulation being that the antiques are non-functional. The implication is that she imported them as non-functioning antiques.

15. That long stemmed smoking pipe that you always see Japanese people smoking in historical settings.

16. Omake is used as an anime and manga fandom term to mean 'extra or bonus'—usually free stuff bundled with books, DVD's, or BD's.

17. This is a cultural reference to a common semi-comical caricature of government corruption. As the story goes, an evil magistrate lures a town girl close and unties her obi and spins her out of her clothes.

18. Famous high-quality textile specially made since the Heian period. Expensive \$\$\$.

19. Kanji Say 'Bullet Grip'.

20. 'Yes', in Chinese.

21. Chinese Pheonix. A terrifying bird that is often associated with Yin—the complement of Yang that is associated with the Chinese Dragon.

22. Seems to refer to the golden rings on ends of the magical shape-shifting staff owned by Sun Wukong in legends. It could change size and shape based on the wielder's wishes but weighed ~8000 kilos.

23. Explicit mention of Sun Wukong's rod.